



FILE

## PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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### PETROLEUM EXPLORATION IN THE GREAT BARRIER REEF.

The Commonwealth Government has taken decisions on the question of future petroleum exploration in the area of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Royal Commissions into exploratory and production drilling for petroleum in the area of the Great Barrier Reef reported in November 1974. All Commissioners - Sir Gordon Wallace, the Chairman, Dr J. E. Smith, and Mr V. J. Moroney, the Members - agreed that drilling "should not be permitted on any cay, island, or reef or national park or marine park when declared".

Both Dr Smith and Mr Moroney considered that drilling could be permitted in certain areas, provided recommended buffer zones and safety precautions were strictly applied and supervised.

Sir Gordon Wallace was of the view "that petroleum drilling should be postponed, and be planned and permitted only in the light, and with the aid, of full scientific knowledge of all the effects of oil pollution direct and indirect, short and long-term, on the coral and other marine life".

The Commonwealth Government has given detailed consideration to these differing views and has decided that, in line with the recommendations of the Chairman of the Royal Commissions, there should be no further exploration for petroleum in the Great Barrier Reef Region and that there should be no renewal of petroleum exploration permits in the Region until the results of both short and longer term research are known.

This decision will give positive effect to the categorical and absolute guarantee I expressed in Parliament on 22 May when I made it clear that the Government will not permit any drilling on the Great Barrier Reef, or any drilling or mining which could damage the Reef.

On that occasion I indicated that AMSTAC - the Australian Marine Science and Technologies Advisory Committee - had been asked by the Government to submit advice to the Government on a programme of research on the reef environment for consideration in the Budget context.

AMSTAC - which is under the Chairmanship of Professor Birch, a distinguished scientist - is a standing Committee of the Australian Science and Technology Council.

On 4 April this year, I wrote to Senator Webster, the Minister for Science and the Environment, and suggested that the Minister might present a submission to AMSTAC on a possible programme of research into the ecosystem of the Great Barrier Reef. As a result of the Minister's submission, and on account of AMSTAC's own expert knowledge, proposals relating to the research programme will shortly be available for consideration by the Government. I am confident that the resulting research programme will do much to minimize Australia's existing lack of knowledge with respect to the ecosystem of the Reef.

An important feature of arrangements with respect to the Reef is the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. This body has the responsibility of recommending areas within the Great Barrier Reef Region for declaration as parts of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The Marine Park Authority, in its 1977-78 Annual Report foreshadowed the possible declaration of the Capricornia Section of the Great Barrier Reef Region as the first section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The Government acknowledges that it has constitutional powers in this area. It has been engaged in discussions with the Queensland Government against that background.

It is desirable that the declaration of the Marine Park should await the outcome of discussions with Queensland which flow from the 1978 Premiers' Conference agreement that the powers of the States be extended to the territorial sea, including the sea-bed. Because of the proximity of the Reef to the Queensland coast, the question of appropriate jurisdiction over that national asset is of obvious relevance in that context. To this end, I wrote to the Premier of Queensland on 19 December last year and suggested that there should be consultation between our respective Governments on development of the arrangements resulting from the Premiers' Conference agreements and also the establishment control, care and development of a Marine Park in the Great Barrier Reef Region.

Consultations, both at the officials and Ministerial level, have taken place - most recently in Sydney on 17 May and I am confident of an early resolution of these complex questions.

I am hopeful that an early announcement can be made of the declaration of the Capricorn Section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The Government's attitude and position on these issues is clear:

- . the Government has stated repeatedly that it will not permit any drilling on the Great Barrier Reef or any mining or drilling which would damage the Reef.
- . Let there be no confusion on this point - no part of the Reef is going to be damaged by an activity that takes place on the Reef or off the Reef .

- . The Government has adopted the recommendations of the Chairman of the Royal Commissions that petroleum drilling should be postponed pending the receipt of the results of short and longer-term research into the Reef
- . The Government has asked AMSTAC to recommend a programme of research to the Government and will be considering that recommendation in the Budget context
- . Discussions with Queensland on the inter-related questions of the Premiers' Conference agreements on the extension of State powers to the territorial seas and the management of the Great Barrier Reef Region are at an advanced stage.

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