Submission from Friends of CSIRO (VIC)

The Friends of CSIRO (Vic) appreciates the opportunity to present a submission to the Senate Select Committee into the Scrutiny of Government Budget Measures.

Since 2014, the federal government has cut more than $110 million from CSIRO’s budget. This has resulted in significant job losses, estimated by the CSIRO Staff association to be 1,400 positions. CSIRO’s CEO Dr. Larry Marshall has proposed further job cuts of 275 research staff. Friends of CSIRO view these funding cuts as preventing CSIRO’s ability to conduct world leading research in areas such as climate science, drought-resistant agriculture, disease prevention and research and development for medicine and industry. It is clear from the CSIRO top 10 inventions to their extensive collaborations, that CSIRO is a world-leading research organisation, making contributions to research on a global scale. However, the proposed job cuts, on top of continued funding cuts since 2014, are damaging CSIRO’s reputation. The proposed job cuts should not go ahead and funding cuts should be reversed.

In an article published by ABC news on 26/4/2016, Professor Steven Sherwood from the University of New South Wales, Climate Research Centre described how the changes to staffing at CSIRO would affect the organisation’s ability to conduct climate modelling for the Australian landscape: “We depend on [CSIRO] to develop these models that are used to do Australian forecasting... The fewer people you have, the less you can do.”

Professor Sherwood described CSIRO expertise and contribution in climate modelling and warned that without CSIRO, such modelling will not be able to be undertaken solely by universities. “There’s a special land and surface model that’s been developed between UNSW and CSIRO that is running in the Australian climate modelling system and it recognises Australian soil and vegetation which are pretty unique... That was done in partnership - but without CSIRO there’s no way that we could do that on our own.”
Apart from the invaluable research that CSIRO provides to Australian cities, regional centres and remote areas, CSIRO contributes to global research. This is especially important in the areas of El Niño-related research, climate modelling and oceanic monitoring especially in the Southern Ocean.

The global climate and environmental science communities have been alarmed by the proposed job cuts, at a time when they describe Australia and CSIRO should be enhancing research capacity in this area.

In response to the proposed cuts, more than 2,800 scientists from around the world wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, his cabinet, other government leaders and the CSIRO governing board. The letter states:

The decision to decimate a vibrant and worldleading research program shows a lack of insight, and a misunderstanding of the importance of the depth and significance of Australian contributions to global and regional climate research. The capacity of Australia to assess future risks and plan for climate change adaptation crucially depends on maintaining and augmenting this research capacity... the Southern Hemisphere will be left with no sustainable, world-class climate modelling capability.

Without CSIRO’s involvement in both climate measurement and modelling, a significant portion of the Southern Hemisphere oceans and atmosphere will go unmonitored. Understanding how current and future climate changes are realised in this region will be seriously compromised. Hence, the capacity of Australia to assess future risks and plan for climate change adaptation crucially depend on maintaining and augmenting existing research capability.

Measurements that underpin climate research are irreplaceable and invaluable. If observing and modelling capacity is lost, so too is Australia and the world’s ability to understand and prepare for climate change.

Friends of CSIRO have seen overwhelming community support for CSIRO and their invaluable contribution to research and development. We now have over 450 active members in QLD, NSW, Victoria and the ACT. Friends of CSIRO is quickly becoming a national organisation as the scientific community and the public express its opposition to the CSIRO cutbacks.

We urge the Senate Select Committee to recommend that the funding and job cuts proposed to CSIRO do not proceed. CSIRO and its work is too important for our cities, regional communities as well as global research.

Thank you for considering our submission.

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