Minister sets new course in bid to end strife at the CSIRO

Exclusive
Marcus Strom
Science editor

After months of turmoil at the CSIRO, Science Minister Greg Hunt has intervened with a new statement of expectations for the organisation that is meant to set it on a path to being the world’s premier public research institution.

The statement sets a clear focus on pure science and climate research alongside the “innovation catalyst” role championed by chief executive Larry Marshall.

One leading CSIRO environmental scientist Fairfax Media spoke to described it as a “clear repudiation” of the direction Dr Marshall had been taking the organisation.

There is no new funding associated with the statement, prompting the scientist to ask: “Who is going to fund our long-term research? That’s the sticker.”

Speaking exclusively to Fairfax Media, Mr Hunt said the document did not repudiate Dr Marshall’s stewardship, although he accepted it was something of a mid-mission corrective.

“We’ve got to be able to do both,” Mr Hunt said, referring to the organisation’s role in basic science and its application in industry.

The document will be sent to the CSIRO board on Monday after a choppy 18 months for the organisation.

During that time, Dr Marshall has overseen about 300 redundancies and faced accusations that he was steering the organisation away from climate research and basic science.

In August, Mr Hunt, newly minted as science minister, instructed the board and chief executive “to put the focus back on climate science”.

Mr Hunt told Fairfax Media that Dr Marshall “is a great asset” for the CSIRO and he hoped his statement will act as a “common platform” for the organisation to move forward.

The statement of expectations commits the organisation to: strive to become the world’s best public research organisation in a decade; pursue pure public good science; recognise the importance of research into climate science; become Australia’s ‘innovation catalyst’; eight new national research priorities including a commitment to “leading climate change science, mitigation and adaptation research, including decadal forecasting”.

The priority areas set out for the organisation are: plant biology and agriculture, human health, food and biosecurity, climate change science, environmental research, resource and energy management, astronomy, advanced manufacturing, digital and data management. In Mr Hunt’s words, the document is “dramatically different” to the 2015 statement issued by then minister Ian MacFarlane. “That was just a legal document, not a vision for the CSIRO,” Mr Hunt told Fairfax Media.

Mr Hunt said he wrote the first draft of the statement by hand, before it was revised half-a-dozen times after consultation with CSIRO, the staff association, industry and the scientific community “The statement refines and makes clear my focus and the focus of the Turnbull government for the CSIRO,” he said.

The president of the Australian Academy of Science, Professor Andrew Holmes, welcomed the consultation and said: “We very much appreciate that the minister is taking the entire scientific community seriously.”

One senior CSIRO scientist said: “It’s great to have this guidance from the minister – it’s appreciated and needed.” However, they said if you want to support pure public good science, you need to fund it. Mr Hunt’s directive in August to refocus on climate science meant 15 new jobs for the Climate Science Centre, but the CSIRO was expected to fund that out of existing budgets.

Mr Hunt said there is natural growth for the CSIRO in the forward estimates, from $1.35 billion today to $1.465 billion in 2019-20.