



Photo: Australian Customs Service

Report details Coastwatch options

Parliament's Public Accounts and Audit Committee has completed a 16-month examination of Australia's coastal surveillance and response operation, Coastwatch. The review looked in detail at options to improve the service, with some disagreement as to the way forward.

The majority report from the Coastwatch review says a new, stand-alone Australian coastguard is not necessary.

The 149-page report says the current Coastwatch system, while not perfect, represents best value for scarce money, with excellent flexibility.

It says the current system amounts to an "outsourced coastguard", with the core function of coordination centrally controlled, but with asset ownership and its associated risks borne by a range of private and public sector entities.

The report points to apparent problems with the US Coastguard and suggests the Australian 'coordination' model "is the way of the future".

It quotes Defence chiefs as being happy with the current model, with Defence's Head of Strategy and Ministerial Services, Mr Allan Behm, stating, "It is fair to say that the economy we bring to much of this sort of activity within the Commonwealth is leading-edge. It is certainly world-class."

The report also quotes Australian Federal Police Commissioner, Michael Palmer, as saying, "from a law enforcement perspective

[my United Kingdom counterparts] would give their right arm to have arrangements similar to those which exist in Australia because [in the UK] there is a competition for intelligence and for investigative supremacy ... that is absolutely counterproductive".

A minority report, however, disagrees, advocating a Coastguard. It argues significant benefits could be gained by merging Coastwatch and Australian Search and Rescue. The larger organisation would need just one operations centre, with direct access to vessel monitoring data. RAN and Customs patrol boats would be transferred to the Coastguard, and multiple crewing would increase the time spent on Coastwatch activities.

The majority report makes 14 recommendations for improving the operation of Coastwatch.

It says the Government should provide Coastwatch with a charter or mission statement outlining expectations of the organisation. No such charter currently exists.

It goes on to make suggestions for developing detailed, weighted performance measures for

Coastwatch, in a 'balanced scorecard' format. Performance information would be used to produce a numerical score against each performance measure. These would be weighted and added to provide a total performance score for the organisation.

The report makes three recommendations regarding policing of illegal fishing, including consideration of additional resources to increase surveillance in Torres Strait, increasing Australia's response capability in northern waters, and investigating the cost of acquiring and outfitting a vessel to patrol the Southern Ocean.

It also makes five recommendations regarding policing of unauthorised aircraft movements (UAMs). The Committee concluded UAMs do not at this stage pose a threat, but preparations are needed to put Australia in a strong position should a threat eventualise.

For a copy of the report

Visit: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jpaa/coastwatch/contents.htm

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What is Coastwatch?

- **Coastwatch** is the body responsible for detecting, reporting and, if required, coordinating a response to potential or actual unlawful activity in Australia's coastal or offshore regions (e.g. detecting 'boat people', illegal fishing etc.).
- **Coastwatch** is an independent unit within the Australian Customs Service. Its Director-General is a seconded officer from the Australian Defence Force, who reports direct to the CEO of Customs.
- **Coastwatch's** surveillance and response operations, which are conducted on behalf of nine separate Commonwealth agencies, are coordinated from a national operations centre in Canberra.
- **Coastwatch** does not 'own' the assets it uses to conduct surveillance and response. It employs civilian aircraft contractors and Australian Defence Force ships for surveillance, and can also call upon other Defence assets and vessels of the Customs National Marine Unit. It shares intelligence with, and from, Defence and other agencies.
- **Coastwatch's** area of operation is vast, comprising some 37,000 km of coastline and more than nine million square km of offshore maritime area (an area 20% larger than Australia's mainland).
- **Coastwatch's** main task is to identify and coordinate interception of 'illegal entrant vehicles' and apprehend 'suspect unlawful non-citizens'. It also deals with illegal fishing; quarantine issues; drug interception; and illegal flights into Australian airspace.
- The total cost of **Coastwatch** operations in 1999-2000 was \$179.3m.