Torres Strait over horizon radar to boost border security

High Frequency Surface Wave Radar receiver on Dauan Island with Customs Coastwatch helicopter

A new state-of-the-art over-the-horizon radar is being trialled in the Torres Strait to boost protection of Australia's northern borders from drugs, disease, illegal immigration and fishing.

The trial was launched by the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Chris Ellison, and Defence Minister, Senator Robert Hill at a handover ceremony attended by island community representatives in May 2005.

The High Frequency Surface Wave Radar (HFSWR) will allow Defence and Customs Coastwatch to better monitor Australia's northern coastline including the highly strategic area of the Torres Strait.

Developed by Defence contractor Daronmont Technologies, the radar can detect surface vessels and low-flying aircraft beyond the visible horizon. Conventional radars are limited to line-of-sight operations.

This technology has the potential to deliver 24-hour wide-area coastal surveillance of aircraft, ships and boats travelling in the Torres Strait. It may also provide early storm warnings and protect offshore oil and gas installations if further developed and deployed.

During the two-to-three-year trial, Customs and Defence will test and evaluate the radar's surveillance potential, using it to complement other surveillance assets and systems.

The $23 million project reinforces the close cooperation between Customs and Defence as both organisations work together to protect our borders.

Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUA) reached with the Dauan and Badu Island communities in February 2004 allowed for the construction of both the radar's transmit and receive facilities on two Torres Strait islands.

A 440-metre long receiver array is located on Dauan Island, in the northern Torres Strait. The transmitter is on the uninhabited Koey Ngurtai ("Pumpkin") Island, to the north of Badu Island, in the middle of Torres Strait.

Under the voluntary agreements, local communities have been provided with employment opportunities during the preparation of the sites and during the construction phase. In addition, several residents are acting as caretakers of these remote sites on an ongoing basis.

The contract for the provision, operation and up to three-years of support of the radar was signed between Defence and Daronmont Technologies in February 2003. The project is jointly funded by Customs and Defence and is managed by the Defence Materiel Organisation.