

Great Barrier Reef

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Great Barrier Reef to get \$60m rescue package from government

Malcolm Turnbull announces \$36.6m will be spent on ‘supporting farmers stopping runoff’ to improve water quality



Malcolm Turnbull has announced a \$60m rescue package for the **Great Barrier Reef** which includes research on developing “resilient” coral, and paying farmers to pollute less.

The package, to be spent over 18 months, will also include an increased number of reef officers and vessels targeting crown of thorns starfish outbreaks.

More than half the package, \$36.6m, will be spent on “supporting farmers stopping runoff off their properties” in order to improve water quality, the prime minister said.

Turnbull said there was a “very strong link” between water pollution and crown of thorns starfish outbreaks.

“The techniques are basically to build swales and ditches and, you know, plantings to slow down the runoff, so that all of the fertilisers and nutrients don’t get into the river and therefore into the reef,” he said.

The announcement appears to be on top of **\$50m announced in April 2016**, also to help farmers reduce runoff and pollution.

That funding, phase three of the federal government’s Reef Trust, allocated \$19.3m to support cane farmers “to move beyond industry best practice for nutrient, irrigation, pesticide and soil management”, \$23.7m to “improve grazing land management”, and “\$7.1m to maintain water quality improvement momentum” in reef catchment area industries.

The government said the funds would kickstart a major research and development program for coral restoration.

The \$6m earmarked for the Australian Institute of Marine Science and the CSIRO would go to development of the program and would include “looking at how best to leverage private investment”.

The institute will also conduct a feasibility study into interventions that **increase the resilience of the reef**.

“Those interventions can be broadly divided into two categories: those that seek to prevent the impact of warming, and those that might help repair if damage occurs,” said Dr Line Bay, senior research scientist and team leader at the institute.

Prevention approaches were based on “assisted evolution”, Bay said, which were aimed at helping corals becoming more temperature-tolerant **so they can avoid bleaching or bleach less from predicted temperatures increases**.

This included helping to introduce coral from the warmer northern Great Barrier Reef to the “cooler but warming” southern areas.

“We believe these new tools for management of the Great Barrier Reef need to be part of a package that contains conventional management process and go hand in hand with strong CO2 mitigation,” Bay said.

A further \$10.4m is earmarked for an “all-out assault on the crown of thorns starfish”, and \$4.9m to increase the number of Marine Park Authority vessels targeting the starfish from three to eight and increase officers monitoring compliance.

Scientists are **increasingly looking for ways to combat the starfish outbreaks**, which make coral more susceptible to bleaching, extreme weather and the effects of climate change.

Greenpeace Australia Pacific described the funding for farmers as “tinkering around the edges” without addressing the bigger issues threatening the reef.

“Coal-fuelled climate change is killing the reef, but instead of phasing out fossil fuels and pulling support for Adani’s Carmichael mine, the PM and Josh Frydenberg are again just dealing with symptoms of the problem,” said the organisation’s climate and energy campaigner, Dr Nikola Casule.

“The reef is now in the early stages of an unprecedented third consecutive year of bleaching. The reef bleached in 2016 and 2017 and the Turnbull government did nothing. The science is clear: dangerous global warming is the biggest threat to the reef.”

WWF-Australia said the announcement was positive but “nowhere near enough”.

“The funding announced today won’t get us to the water quality targets we promised Unesco,” said spokesman Sean Hoobin.

“Failing on these targets is failing the reef. With almost half the coral cover lost to bleaching over the last two years the reef needs a massive new investment to help it respond to global warming.”

The Labor opposition said the additional resources were “good as far as they go” but without proper action on climate change “it’s clear this government has given up on the reef”.

Turnbull’s announcement followed revelations that millions of dollars in federal funds was being handed to tourism-linked groups for **Great Barrier Reef** protection, despite official advice recommending against the projects or repeatedly finding them to be failing.

Guardian Australia reported on Sunday that tourism operators received and continue to receive millions in contracts to cull crown of thorns starfish despite evaluations repeatedly finding it to have failed or potentially worsening the problem.

Those funds also included \$2.2m spent on a project to install giant fans on a small part of the reef to cool the water.

Bay would not comment on that project but said those being considered under the \$61m package were approaches that were able to be scaled up, rather than local approaches such as the giant fans.

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