

Does Australia need a Coastguard?



The Public Accounts and Audit Committee wants to clarify community and government expectations of Coastwatch.
Photograph courtesy of the Australian Customs Service.

Parliament's financial management watchdog, the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, is undertaking a detailed review of Coastwatch, Australia's coastal surveillance body. The review follows on from a recent investigation by the Auditor-General and includes an examination of whether there should be an Australian Coastguard.

Coastwatch's task is to provide a civil surveillance and response service covering Australia's 37,000 kilometres of coastline and the offshore maritime zone of 9 million square kilometres. Coastwatch is responsible for detecting potential or actual unlawful activity in coastal and offshore waters and, if required, will coordinate a response. Operations are coordinated from a national operations centre in Canberra and involve a mix of civil aviation contractors, Australian Defence Force boats and aircraft, and the Customs marine fleet.

In 1998-99, Coastwatch activities cost \$168m, including \$35m spent by Customs and \$133m spent on Defence Force air and sea services.

The Public Accounts and Audit Committee's investigation comes in the wake of a restructure of Coastwatch undertaken last year. The restructure, which followed the landing of three vessels carrying illegal immigrants on the New South Wales coast, made Coastwatch more independent of Customs control. At the time, an additional \$124m was added to Coastwatch's budget over four years. The extra money will pay for two additional fixed wing surveillance aircraft and an additional surveillance helicopter.

The Public Accounts and Audit Committee will seek to clarify community and government expectations of Coastwatch and will assess how efficiently Coastwatch uses its assets in undertaking its various surveillance and law enforcement tasks. The Committee will consider whether any laws need to be strengthened to help Coastwatch, whether there are new

technological developments that can be added to Coastwatch's armoury and whether Australia should have an independent Coastguard.

Already a number of submissions to the inquiry, including from the Australian Defence Association, have argued that an Australian Coastguard is essential to counter growing threats in Australia's offshore zones. The Defence Association claims that for too long "Australia has relied upon a multitude of agencies with overlapping responsibilities and powers, and a quite inadequate level of resources".

"A paramilitary force, that is not quite military but more than a lightly armed police force, is essential," the Australian Defence Association said.

Information about the inquiry, including how to make a submission, can be found at the Committee's web site at www.apf.gov.au/house/committee/jpaa or from the Committee secretariat on telephone (02) 6277 4615.

You said it

"Introduction of a 'Fourth Force' with disparate capital equipment, policy, systems, personnel, procedures, etc, is an unnecessary waste. Use the Royal Australian Navy's resources."

Peter Stagg

Glen Waverley, Victoria

"My proposition is, therefore, that if we as a nation want our inshore waters to be properly protected, we must provide a management structure which is dedicated to that purpose on a permanently unambiguous basis, ie where the career of all so engaged depends only upon the success of that task."

Bill Willcox

Mona Vale, New South Wales

"A properly organised Coastguard is not only a maritime police force, it also serves as an air-sea rescue service and from that aspect alone it is a very desirable instrumentality. The present locally-funded rescue services perform an admirable task, but their resources are plainly not up to the increasing demands placed upon them by our expanding population."

William H Watson

Valley View, South Australia