

# CSIRO Staff Slam Executives' Spin

CSIRO hit the headlines comprehensively in all mainstream newspapers after *Australasian Science's* November/December issue went to press, with reports and critical comment emanating from CSIRO's Annual Report for 2004–05 and the November Senate Estimates' hearing.

*The Canberra Times*, for example, ran front-page stories and features on the debacle, headlining the state of CSIRO as "Running on Empty", "Bled to Death" and "Flagships Falter".

The Annual Report was the fifth in the "reforming" reign of Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, but when it was released he was absent in the UK "pursuing strategy development". Since returning he has not responded to the barrage of damaging stories that stemmed from the acknowledgement that his "strategy" of increasing "external income" has, in fact, gone into reverse with a deficit of \$14.5 million.

*Australasian Science* has been warning of the risks associated with Garrett's "commercialise or perish" push since mid-2002, and was blackballed by CSIRO for its independent reportage.

To balance the books, CSIRO Executives are now culling 200 of its 780 "support staff", claiming this will maintain funds for researchers. Ironically, the number of CSIRO executives earning more than \$300,000 doubled between 2003–04 and 2004–05.

Senior researchers, who remain unnamed to avoid disciplinary action under CSIRO's restrictive "Policy

on Public Comment", have told *Australasian Science* of their deep concern that CSIRO's specialist Divisions are being further weakened by centralisations. For example, the number of tradespeople whose skills have been integral to designing, building and conducting high-level experiments are being reduced and withdrawn into pools of travelling trouble-shooters.

CSIRO Staff Association President, Dr Michael Borgas, has reflected the privately evident despair of staff in a strong statement to *Australasian Science*. He wrote after examining the evidence in this writer's Right of Reply in the Senate to Garrett's public attacks on this magazine, which were orchestrated by his controversial Communications Director, Donna Staunton.

CSIRO has been ineffective with dealing with the communication issues. Staff Association members welcome debate about CSIRO and critical evaluation in the media. Members are angered more with the link to a tobacco lobbyist, high salaries for non-science executives in CSIRO, and the lack of performance and transparency in the corporate sphere than by criticism or attack from the outside.

The Association supports the dedicated staff in communications and cannot comprehend why reasonable requests for information have become such an issue, even in the context of critical articles in *Australasian Science*. The Association has repeatedly asked CSIRO manage-

ment for more pragmatic dealings with science journalists, regardless of real or perceived hostility. Science needs to be open to full and transparent scrutiny and often has to deal with conflict and dispute.

We expect our leadership to be able to operate effectively in such circumstances, and behave better than as documented in Senate Estimates ([http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet\\_ctte/estimates/bud\\_0506/dest/att1.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/estimates/bud_0506/dest/att1.pdf)).

In particular, we expect to be able to tolerate open and frank debate internally, and operate without blind compliance to highly paid senior staff. A business model, or even the appearance of a compliant, unquestioning propaganda-driven organisation, is not an acceptable strategy for CSIRO. Provided resources sustain and support the quality and freedom of the science base in CSIRO, and with courage and scientific truth as our guide, the Association sees an important public-good role for CSIRO in taking positions unpopular with powerful interest groups in society with vested interests conflicting with the common wealth.

With regard to specific criticisms about particular work and its promotion and communication, the Staff Association first and foremost is concerned about the workers directly involved and the pressures that can be exerted on them to demonstrate performance in the corporate world before proper scientific scrutiny. The Association advocates that the reputation of CSIRO be maintained by high levels of publication in the best of the world scientific literature, and is pleased to see a growing recommitment to scientific publishing excellence following from the Science Review process underway in CSIRO.

Peter Pockley

## Value for Money

The implied criticism of CSIRO communications manager Donna Staunton's salary of \$330,000 (*Canberra Times Forum* November 5) is plainly unjustified. CSIRO has been on the radio and on the front pages of every major newspaper recently. **John Daly, Lyons, ACT**

Source: *The Canberra Times*, 8 November 2005. The headline quotes from Garrett's defence of Staunton in Senate Estimates.