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# Reef is a jewel in our crown and we strive to protect it



**JOSH FRYDENBERG**

A NATURAL wonder of the world, the Great Barrier Reef is one of Australia's prized possessions. Creating more than 70,000 full time jobs and stretching 2300km along the coastline from Gladstone to Cape York, the Reef is central to the environmental and economic story of our nation.

For these reasons and others we must do everything we can to protect and promote the Reef, including engaging constructively with international organisations like UNESCO and its World Heritage Committee, which has shown a keen interest in our conservation efforts.

When the Coalition came to office in 2013, the Reef was on the Committee's in danger "watch list". But, through the good work of my predecessor Greg Hunt and working closely with the Queensland Government, the Reef was removed last year from that list and the chair of the World Heritage Committee praised

Australia as a global role model for the management of World Heritage properties.

The Federal and State Governments' \$2 billion Reef 2050 Plan, with its 151 action items across seven key themes from biodiversity to heritage, and the Commonwealth's \$1 billion Reef Fund, which

invests in clean energy projects tackling water quality and climate change, now provides a comprehensive and co-ordinated plan of action.

Against this backdrop I met with Director General of UNESCO Irina Bokova to update her on our progress.

For example, in the area of water quality, we are working

with farmers to reduce nitrogen and sediment run off into the Reef. Adopting a market-based, competitive tender process, farmers are being financially incentivised to develop their own nitrogen targets and implement them.

In just the last year, trials in the wet tropics have prevented 86 tonnes of nitrogen from otherwise flowing into the Reef and this is just the start, as the goal is to reduce nitrogen run off by 80 per cent in the catchment area by 2025.

Reducing this run-off is important because the crown of thorns starfish, a coral-eating predator, has been breeding in rapid numbers as increased nitrogen flows into the water. During spawning, large females can produce up to 65 million eggs each as plankton blooms from more nutrients in the water, providing food for the starfish.

Indeed, the Institute of Marine Science documented

how more than half the cover on coral reefs has been lost to crown of thorns outbreaks. While additional efforts have been taken to tackle the crown of thorns, including the commissioning of a new vessel staffed with indigenous rangers, minimising nitrogen run off is also key.

Work being undertaken via the federal \$210 million Reef Trust also includes restoring farming landscapes and reducing gully erosion.

Improved grazing practices and land care management helps reduce sediment flowing into the Reef which would otherwise cloud the water and undermine coral health.

While it was revealed in the recent Great Barrier Reef Report Card that almost half the horticulture and grain properties in the Reef catchment area have already adopted best practice, much more work is needed, particularly in partnership with the sugarcane and grazing sectors.

Another area of focus has been port developments and dredge disposal.

Again, when we came to office, we inherited from Labor five dredge disposal projects in the marine park itself.

We quickly moved to end this practice, banning port-related capital dredge disposal in the entire world heritage area for the first time. The State Government has also moved to prohibit new port developments in the Reef area outside existing port areas.

In addition to nitrogen and sediment run-off, crown of thorns and developments, there are many other challenges the Reef faces.

Indeed, in 2016, a combination of climate change and El Nino effects led to a global coral bleaching event which caused 22 per cent mortality across the Reef. Of that, 85 per cent occurred in the 650km stretch in the far



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northern part of the Reef.

This was a terrible development but, contrary to some reports, the Reef is not dead and remains resilient. Indeed, in the three years leading up to the bleaching, coral cover increased across the Reef by 19 per cent.

The good news is that, just 18 months into the Reef 2050 Plan, real progress is being made. Active engagement by scientific experts, industry and community groups, including traditional land owners, has helped the Turnbull and Palaszczuk Governments implement a well-resourced, co-ordinated and evidence-based strategy to ensure the future health of the Reef.

More work must be done and will be done but we are well on our way.

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