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## **National Geoscience Expert Panel needed as high-level “early warning system” on environmental disasters**

**The federal and state governments must urgently establish an independent national advisory panel of expert geoscientists to provide a much-needed high-level ‘early warning system’ on a wide range of environmental crises years before these crises become irreversible, the Geological Society of Australia (GSA) has urged as National Science Week gets underway across Australia.**

“Australia has been instrumental in the development of an early warning system for tsunami risk along the Australian coastline—and this has been a terrific initiative—but the same level of attention has not been given to the desperate need for an early warning system for many other environmental crises” new GSA President, Professor Peter Cawood, said. “As a result, we are now seeing, as just one example, very serious environmental problems such as falling water levels in the Murray River and the immediate risks to the Lower Murray Lakes being posed by acid sulphate soils.

“Our governments need to take the ‘early warning’ concept a step further and establish a National Geoscience Expert Panel to provide an early warning system for a range of future environmental crises which, if not tackled early on, have real potential to reap irreversible environmental and economic damage in this country.

“Some of the key environmental problems which are plaguing Australia at present—such as salinity, drought, water contamination, water shortages, climate change, loss of productive land and the impact of urban development on land health—have been on the radar of geoscientists for many years, long before these issues became hot political topics. But there has been no real mechanism for the geoscientific community as a whole to collectively feed this ‘early warning research’ back to governments, or for this research to be treated seriously by governments, at such an early stage in the development of the problems.

“For example, while geoscientists have known about potential environmental crises such as salinity and constrained water flow decades before they have even become visible, it is really only once the rivers have stopped running, the lakes have salted up or turned acidic, productive land has been degraded beyond repair and the wildlife has started dying that governments have begun to take some notice of what the geoscientific community has been saying.

“A National Geoscience Expert Panel would serve as an independent voice to provide scientifically-based warnings and recommendations on a wide range of environmental problems collectively to governments many years before they hatch into full-blown environmental crises, thus giving governments a much earlier timeframe to respond and a much better chance of implementing workable and successful solutions. It is very easy for governments to ignore the research of one expert geoscientist, but much harder for them to ignore the collective recommendations of a high-level, independent expert panel.

“We recognise that organisations like Geoscience Australia and CSIRO provide valuable advice to government on a wide range of geoscientific issues, however the formation of a National Geoscience

Expert Panel would enable advice to be consolidated from many geoscientific experts—including those organisations—and collectively fed back to government.”

Professor Cawood said the development of a National Geoscience Expert Panel would complement a National Geoscience Research Strategy (also proposed by the GSA), which would aim to ensure that all commercially-focused and academic geoscientific research into issues including clean and reliable future energy, salinity management, climate change, geo-hazards, groundwater exploration and contamination, land use and land degradation is available in one central point so all sectors of geoscience and governments can benefit from it.

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