

TORRES STRAIT SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE	Meeting 46 27 August 2008
TSSAC PROCEDURES Conflict of Interest Protocols	Agenda Item No. 2.3 FOR DISCUSSION

PURPOSE

That the TSSAC **DISCUSS** and **AGREE** on processes to identify and address potential conflict of interest of members of the TSSAC.

BACKGROUND

The TSSAC at its 45th meeting recognised there was potential for Conflict of Interest (COI) to undermine the effectiveness of the Committee in assessing research projects. The Committee identified the need to develop a set of guiding protocols allowing COI to be addressed in a transparent and open manner (45.3.1.3).

DISCUSSION

For the TSSAC, the greatest potential for the detrimental effects of COI to manifest is in the evaluation of research proposals submitted to the Committee. Conflict may also be involved in identifying suitable research providers for identified research projects.

The core of quality peer review processes requires all participants act in good faith, in an open and reasonable manner.

COI can occur in varying situations, in a variety of forms. COI could be a direct or perceived COI, and both should be considered.

The TSSAC should discuss and agree on a process for developing a set of guiding protocols for identifying and mitigating the effects of COI. This process may include a number of steps that are presented below as suggestions to stimulate discussion.

Phase 1: Identify and define potential situations where COI may occur such as:

- a) direct involvement of members in the research application where a member may be the Chief Investigator or Associate/Principle Investigator or Co-Investigator;
- b) direct or potential involvement due to a personal financial interest in the outcome of the granting process;
- c) potential involvement as a scientific¹, or departmental/ institutional colleague²;
- d) perceived involvement due to a family or personal relationship, either currently or during the past five years;
- e) where a verbal or written dispute has occurred at any time between an applicant and the individual acting for the TSSAC; and
- f) any other perceived conflicts.

¹ a scientific colleague is defined as another scientist with whom the collaborator has published papers, held grants or acted in a Higher Degree by Research student/Supervisor relationship with any of the applicants during the past five years.

² a colleague within an identifiable organisational group from which joint benefit may follow award of the grant, ie. Members of the same Research Institute or affiliated University Department or Faculty.

The TSSAC should document definitions for any terms used in these criteria to avoid ambiguity, for example, “scientific”, “departmental/institutional colleagues”, as well as “family” and “personal relationships”.

Phase 2: Discuss and agree on suitable procedures to mitigate COI.

- 1) Members should declare their interests at the commencement of each meeting and be required to update these at each meeting as part of normal meeting procedures.
- 2) in addition to agenda and associated papers sent out prior to the meeting, information on investigators and institutions involved in applications being reviewed by the Committee will be provided to members.
- 3) Members will be required to review the information and declare any real or perceived COI as well as a description of the nature of the COI at the commencement of any SAC meeting.
- 4) Where it is determined that a direct conflict of interest exists, the Committee should discuss the most appropriate course of action. The Committee may allow the member to continue to participate in the discussions relating to the matter but not in any decision making process. In most cases the appropriate action will be that the member will remove themselves from the room during the evaluation process and ranking of the application. If members become aware of a potential COI during the course of the meeting, they must immediately disclose the COI and the members present must consider how best to deal with the disclosure at that point.
- 5) The disclosure of interest and subsequent action taken by the Committee should be recorded in the minutes.

It should be noted that while these COI protocols will form an important element in mitigating COI, it is the members themselves that are most familiar with their own situations. It is the members themselves who will be able to identify situations where there may be an apparent or potential COI. In these situations, their obligations as described in the PZJA Fisheries Management Paper No. 1 (May 2008) would require them to take the appropriate action.

RECOMMENDATION

To be discussed.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Nil