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MEDIA RELEASE

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Research Agency Charters recognise the necessity of independent public science

The Government has honoured its election commitment to provide a charter for CSIRO and other public sector research agencies to protect them from political interference.

The President of FASTS, Professor Ken Baldwin said today's release of the Charters is a positive step forward to valuing the integrity of public sector research agencies and the critical role that independent science and research must play to inform public debate.

“The unfettered input of independent, validated science is essential for sensible policy formulation and public debate on important issues such as climate change, water use, bio-security and energy futures”.

“The charters are a response to perceptions that scientists and science agencies were being politically constrained in their capacity to participate in debates on issues of public interest.”

“The charters properly stress the importance of validation of research through peer review and implicitly recognise the value to the community and public policy of a diversity of views.”

“In some respects, the Charters are a somewhat narrower interpretation of the broad ambition set out in Minister Carr's public statements in January and February this year when he indicated the Charters “will enshrine not only the right, but the obligation, of scientists and other researchers to participate in public research debates”.”

“The Charters would have greater power if - as well as conferring the right for science agencies and scientists to speak freely in their field of expertise - they also articulated an obligation to do so. Public debate is undermined if scientists and researchers breach their responsibilities by omission i.e. by not speaking out against misinformation or misconceptions”.

“There is a complementary obligation on Government to ensure that scientists are appropriately equipped to speak out. The Charter for the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) is the only one to make explicit the responsibility of the agency to provide regular training and professional advice to enable their scientists and researchers to effectively communicate with the media”.

“This provision should be articulated in all the Charters, to provide for a more complete statement of what is required for scientists to participate in public debate”.

“Despite the narrower interpretation of rights and responsibilities, the Charters are an important step forward, and the Government is to be commended for delivering on their intentions”, concluded Professor Baldwin.

Media Inquiries: Bradley Smith (0408) 511 261

NB: program, audio and support materials on charters from *FASTS Forum On The Rights And Obligations Of Scientists And Researchers In Universities And Public Sector Agencies* (22 February, 2008) are available at http://www.fastsof.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16

The Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS) is the peak representative body for 60,000 Australian scientists and technologists.