

[COPY]

Dr Andrew Austin
President, Society of Australian Systematic Biologists

14 May 1998

Dear Dr Austin

I very much appreciated having the opportunity to meet with you and the Presidents of Australia's other peak taxonomic societies yesterday. It was useful to hear your views, about the Australian Biological Resources Study (ABRS) in particular, and taxonomy in Australia in general. It is important very work which I enthusiastically endorse.

I note your concerns about both the level of and uncertainties in funding for ABRS over the last few years.

You will be aware that this Government on coming to office in 1996 was faced with the immediate task of making substantial savings in expenditure. These savings were found across a range of Government activities, and ABRS like other programs had to bear a share of this.

The ABRS program is a complex one, with expenditure devoted to supporting taxonomic training, maintenance of a secretariat function for various advisory and editorial committees, management of the publications program, and of course the grants program. Some of these areas have more flexibility than others to absorb short-term funding impacts, although in the longer term all are essential to the well-being and balance of the program.

In the 1997/98 Budget cycle it became apparent that special supplementation of the ABRS budget would be necessary if we were to avoid unacceptable impacts on the work of the program and upon those in the taxonomic community who cooperate with ABRS to achieve its objectives. This valuable partnership of Commonwealth and State-based institutions, organisations and individuals has an essential role to play in biodiversity management which underpins the activities of the Natural Heritage Trust.

To address the immediate issue, I authorised supplementation of \$1.2 million dollars for the ABRS budget in the current cycle, and this has allowed a full program of grants and other activities for this year, returning the funding to its historical levels. I enclose an expenditure table of the \$1.2 million. The budget for next year (1998/99) will provide a core funding of \$2.2 million. I am again looking at a supplementation consistent with the spirit I demonstrated this year.

You also raised questions about the overall level of funding for ABRS, and the ways in which funding was distributed between the various elements of the program. I will soon be announcing the appointment of a new Chairman for the ABRS Advisory Committee. Once this appointment is made I shall be asking the Committee to re-examine all functions of ABRS in the light of the recent program evaluation, and to provide me with suggestions and options for its implementation.

I do appreciate the need for greater certainty over funding the program.

Thankyou for providing me with your views on this important program.

Yours sincerely

Robert Hill
Leader of the Government in the Senate
Minister for the Environment
Parliament House
Canberra. ACT. 2600.