

# Australian government orders science agency to pull back on climate job cuts

But researchers say damage is already done after job losses at CSIRO.

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Don Arnold/Getty

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull with Greg Hunt, who is now science minister, in March.

Australia's government has ordered its national science agency to re-prioritize basic climate research — six months after the organization unveiled [controversial plans to slash jobs](#) in the sector. But the intervention may have come too late to salvage damage already caused, researchers say.

The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) will — on government instructions — create 15 new climate-science jobs and receive an extra Aus\$37 million (US\$28 million) over the next 10 years, both for salaries and extra support in the sector, science minister Greg Hunt announced on 4 August.

"It's a new government and we're laying out a direction that climate science matters," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Hunt, a former environment minister who was put in charge of the industry, innovation and science ministry after July's federal election, said that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull supported the move.

A spokesperson for Hunt's ministry said that he was in the process of preparing a "new statement of expectations" for CSIRO, and that the net effect of the government's intervention would be to bring the agency's total number of climate scientists to 115, down from around 135 earlier in the year.

## Partial U-turn

"In the context that this is a U-turn from previous cuts, this is good news," says Wenju Cai, a climate modeller at CSIRO. But he points out that the government did not intervene when CSIRO's chief executive, Larry Marshall, first announced plans to cut hundreds of climate-science jobs in February. At the time, the government distanced itself from CSIRO's cuts, calling them an agency-level decision.

Climate job losses so far number around 35, after strong opposition from both researchers and the public. "If the directive came earlier we would not have had to endure those very painful cuts," Cai says.

"A lot of damage has been done, a lot of people have been lost," says William Steffen, a climate scientist at the Australian National University in Canberra. "We need a thorough, authoritative and accurate assessment of where we stand now, including Mr Hunt's intervention today, compared to where we were before Larry Marshall got into the act and started sacking CSIRO scientists. Until we get the numbers on that, we can't say what the long-term impact of this announcement really is," he says.

A spokesperson for CSIRO says the agency isn't commenting at this stage. CSIRO's staff association says that Hunt's intervention does not go far enough to repair damage done by the agency's cuts, and that the cuts are not over. "CSIRO management is continuing to proceed with plans to slash 296 jobs across the organization, including more than 60 experienced climate and marine scientists," says a statement posted on its website.

"You don't need to be a scientist to realise that employing 15 climate researchers when you're in the process of sacking more than 50 doesn't add up. It's not going to restore CSIRO's research capacity or repair Australia's global reputation," said Sam Popovski, secretary for the staff association. He suggested that Hunt direct CSIRO to halt all current job cuts.

In April, CSIRO had announced that it would sack fewer staff and would [launch a new climate-science centre in Hobart](#), Tasmania, which would employ 40 full-time researchers — a move that one scientist characterized as "trying to put a sticking plaster over a gaping wound". So far, that centre has neither opened nor had a director appointed, Popovski told *Nature*.

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