Australian Government
Defence

Woomera Prohibited Area Advisory Board

Annual Report 2023-2024



To defend Australia and its national interests in order to advance Australia's security and prosperity

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Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara, Antakirinja Matu-Yankunytjatjara, Arabana, Gawler Ranges, Kokatha and Maralinga Tjarutja peoples, the traditional custodians of the lands upon which Defence operates within the Woomera Prohibited Area.

We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

We also acknowledge the service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have contributed – and continue to contribute – to the defence of Australia and its national interests.

Image warning
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this document may contain images or content referring to deceased persons. It may also contain words or descriptions that are culturally sensitive.

Images
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Cover image
Woomera Museum

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Chair's Report

The Woomera Prohibited Area (WPA) is a place of relevance for national security, economic and cultural interests. The WPA is a critical site for Defence testing of advanced and emerging capabilities. Defence also shares the WPA with other users including pastoralists, mining operations, tourists, traditional owners and native title holders. In this unique context, the WPA Advisory Board oversees and supports continued coexistence between all users of the WPA.

Readers may notice that this year's Annual Report is significantly streamlined in comparison to previous years. Taken together with the publication of twice-yearly Dashboard Reports, the new reporting format seeks to provide updates and commentary regarding WPA coexistence in a more approachable manner.

During 2023-2024, the Advisory Board has overseen progress on the implementation of the remaining four recommendations of 2018 Review. This has included finalisation of the South Australian Government's Resource Prospectivity and Economic Assessment of the WPA, and Defence scoping of a pathway towards delivery of a WPA digital platform.

The *2024 Review of the WPA Coexistence Framework*, the Government's independent review into the settings of the WPA is currently underway, led by Ms Rebecca Skinner PSM. The 2024 Review is timely, in the 10 years since the WPA Rule came into effect, Australia's strategic environment has shifted dramatically. The WPA's continued importance for the development, test and evaluation of Defence capabilities was highlighted in the 2024 National Defence Strategy. The 2024 Review will deliver an assessment of the current WPA coexistence framework, and make recommendations to balance national security, economic and cultural perspectives in the national interest. These recommendations will inform remaking of the *Woomera Prohibited Area Rule 2014* that underpins the coexistence arrangements, which is due to sunset in October 2026.

The Board would like to express its sincere appreciation to all stakeholders for continuing to work collaboratively to ensure the success of coexistence in the WPA.

Amanda Vanstone AO
Chair
Woomera Prohibited Area Advisory Board

WPA Coexistence Framework

The WPA Rule and WPA coexistence governance arrangements (Memorandum of Understanding between the Commonwealth of Australia and the South Australian Government and the WPA Advisory Board) together form the WPA Coexistence Framework.

The Framework recognises that while Department of Defence (Defence) requirements for the testing and evaluation of military systems are given precedence within the WPA, the area is also important for pastoral activity, resource exploration and production, Aboriginal native title and cultural heritage, and other activities such as tourism and scientific research.

Defence has regularly reviewed coexistence arrangements to ensure they continue to strike the right balance between national security, economic and cultural priorities (in 2010 and 2018), including the current 2024 Review of the WPA Coexistence Framework.

The majority of the recommendations from the 2018 Review have been implemented. The remaining four still in progress are being considered as part of the 2024 Review.

Table 1: Summary of the status of WPA 2018 Review Recommendations

Recommendation 1	**Completed**
Building on the success of current arrangements, contemporary coexistence in the WPA should focus as much on strong and productive relationships as on sound legal and policy frameworks.	Steering and working groups were established to oversee implementation and guide operational and strategic efforts. A strategic vision and communications plan was implemented to reflect the strategic landscape and keep stakeholders informed of WPA activities. Implemented modernised and tailored online interface for all WPA users.
Recommendation 2	**In Progress**
Defence and the South Australian Government should employ a collaborative co-design process to determine the feasibility of a more flexible grid-based arrangement for the WPA green zone.	Defence has engaged closely with the 2024 Review, including providing detailed modelling of testing capability to inform the feasibility of a ‘flexible green zone’ proposal.
Recommendation 3	**Completed**
All users of the WPA should give greater emphasis to managing the introduction and use of technology in the area.	The Advisory Board agreed to a Non-Defence Use of Technology Framework.
Recommendation 4	**Completed**
To manage the risks to national security associated with investment in the WPA, a key consideration for Defence when it assesses WPA access applications should be whether companies have substantive Australian ownership, control, and influence.	Security obligations and foreign investment guidance for WPA access is published on the WPA website. Defence discusses safety and security obligations with WPA stakeholders in regular case management meetings. Defence conducts quarterly audits and governance checks of company data, including foreign investment.

Recommendation 5	In Progress
Geological and economic analysis of the mineral, energy, and groundwater resources potential of the Gawler Craton Area, including the red zone within the WPA, should continue.	The Department of Energy and Mining (SA) has finalised a Resource Prospectivity and Economic Assessment of the WPA.
Recommendation 6	**Completed**
To address concerns about the feasibility of developing new mines in the WPA, Defence should reaffirm publicly its commitment to coexistence in the WPA.	WPA users were provided clear security obligation guidance and foreign investment guidelines on the WPA website to understand the unique requirements of operating in the WPA. Case management and engagement with stakeholders provides an understanding of industry needs for new mining activities in the WPA. The Advisory Board considered and agreed not to pursue third-party technical advisers for non-defence use of the WPA.
Recommendation 7	**Completed**
To strengthen the role of the WPA Advisory Board.	The WPA Advisory Board Terms of Reference was updated, a Memorandum of Understanding between the South Australian Government and Defence was signed and an annual Health Check provides the Board with ongoing feedback on the Coexistence Framework effectiveness.
Recommendation 8	**Completed**
There should be a greater collective emphasis on the security of companies operating in the WPA.	The self-check and security obligation guidance has been published on the WPA website. Defence security risk assessment framework updated to reflect contemporary security requirements and robust risk guidance.
Recommendation 9	**Completed**
Defence and Aboriginal groups in the WPA should continue to build on their already strong relationships.	A WPA Heritage Management Plan was finalised, the Advisory Board Chair and Deputy Chair continue annual meetings with Aboriginal Corporations of the WPA and further developing the Air Force Regional Compliance Officer program.
Recommendation 10	**Completed**
Consideration should be given to new ways of managing small parcels of land no longer suitable for pastoral activity, and greater guidance provided to pastoralists for claiming compensation for losses due to defence testing.	Acquisitions will be considered based on Defence's strategic needs. Guidance for compensation claims is available on the WPA website.
Recommendation 11	**In Progress**
Administration of the WPA coexistence arrangements should be modernised.	PDF smart forms for permit and access applications have been introduced. Defence is exploring options to deliver a WPA digital application platform.
Recommendation 12	**In Progress**
A further complete review of WPA arrangements by 2025.	The 2024 Review of the WPA Coexistence Framework is underway.

WPA Advisory Board

The WPA Advisory Board is led by an independent Chair and Deputy Chair, and includes ex-officio members representing Air Force, Defence, the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR), the SA Department for Energy and Mining (DEM) and Defence SA. The Advisory Board's primary role is to advise the Commonwealth and SA Government on managing coexistence for the benefit of all stakeholders. Under the 2019 Terms of Reference, the Board is responsible for:

- Monitoring and reporting on the balance of national security and economic interests;
- Overseeing the implementation of the coexistence policy arrangements; and
- Fostering strategic relationships between Defence and non-Defence users.

By proactively engaging with Aboriginal communities, the resources sector, environmental groups, pastoralists, tourists and researchers, the Advisory Board shapes coexistence in the WPA and helps balance Defence's use of the WPA with the interests of other stakeholders. This provides a strong foundation to oversee and report on the Coexistence Framework and the balance it strikes between national security, commercial interests and cultural heritage.

The Advisory Board alternates its biannual meetings between Canberra and Adelaide to reflect the Commonwealth and South Australian Government's joint custodianship of, and shared responsibilities for, coexistence. Advisory Board meetings were held in December 2023 and July 2024.

Membership

The Hon Amanda Vanstone AO
Chair

Ms Andrea Slattery
Deputy Chair

Air Marshal
Stephen Chappell DSC, CSC, OAM
Chief of Air Force

Mr Hugh Jeffery
Deputy Secretary
Australian Government
Department of Defence

Ms Jane Urquhart PSM
Deputy Secretary
Australian Government
Department of Industry,
Science and Resources

Dr Paul Heithersay PSM
Chief Executive
South Australian Government
Department for Energy and Mining

Mr Matt Opie
Chief Executive
South Australian Government
Defence SA

Year in Review: July 2023 – June 2024

Use of the WPA by all stakeholders has continued to increase, reinforcing the importance of continued balancing of cultural, economic and national security interests under the Coexistence Framework. This has included an increase in resource, research and tourist activity, after a noticeable decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In August 2024 the Federal Government appointed Ms Rebecca Skinner to lead a review into the settings of the WPA, to ensure coexistence arrangements serve the requirements of all stakeholders.

Driving increased Defence use of the WPA has been the requirement to accelerate the development and introduction of capabilities prioritised in the 2024 National Defence Strategy and 2024 Integrated Investment Program. Defence test and evaluation demand for the WPA remained high over the year, including testing of the MQ-28a Ghost Bat, hypersonics, and live-fire testing of National Advanced Surface to Air Missile System. Due to its size and low population density, the WPA remains the only range within Australia (and in many instances, the western world) suitable for testing an increasing number of Defence weapon systems.

DEM finalised the Resource Prospectivity and Economic Assessment Review of the WPA's mineral and energy resource potential in 2023. DEM has also continued its work on geological and geophysical mapping of South Australia including the WPA under the South Australian Discovery Mapping project.

DISR led a site visit to Emu Field with the Traditional Owners of Maralinga Tjarutja lands and project contractors, where they sought feedback from Traditional Owners on the proposed site maintenance activities.

The third annual WPA Health Check 2023 was endorsed by the Advisory Board in July 2024. A key finding of the Health Check was that Defence had minimised disruption to commercial activities in the WPA through the streamlined and efficient processing of permit applications, and through the implementation of an improved case management process. The annual survey reinforced this finding with 81 per cent of permit holders rating their ability to access the WPA when needed as 'excellent' or 'very good.' The remaining 19 per cent rated their ability to access as 'good.' Patrols conducted by the Air Force Compliance Monitoring team over the year identified no significant issues with permit holders meeting their obligations.

The Commonwealth of Australia and the South Australian Government will continue working with all WPA stakeholders to ensure WPA coexistence remains fit for purpose in the current strategic environment, whilst balancing economic and cultural perspectives.



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