



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture,
Water and the Environment

Guide to reporting on program outcomes

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Summary

Reporting on outcomes ensures a complete picture of program performance and effectiveness. This supports the improvement of programs and maximises benefits from government-funded initiatives.

Outcome reporting is also key to informing program-level reviews and evaluation. Information, trends and key lessons from outcome reporting are also used to inform program design.

Reporting on outcomes allows us to understand what we have achieved and the difference we have made against program objectives. In contrast, output reporting in isolation provides very limited information on program performance.

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment requires that you, as service providers of government-funded programs, report against short-, medium- and longer-term outcomes. This guide spells out our outcome reporting requirements.

Introduction

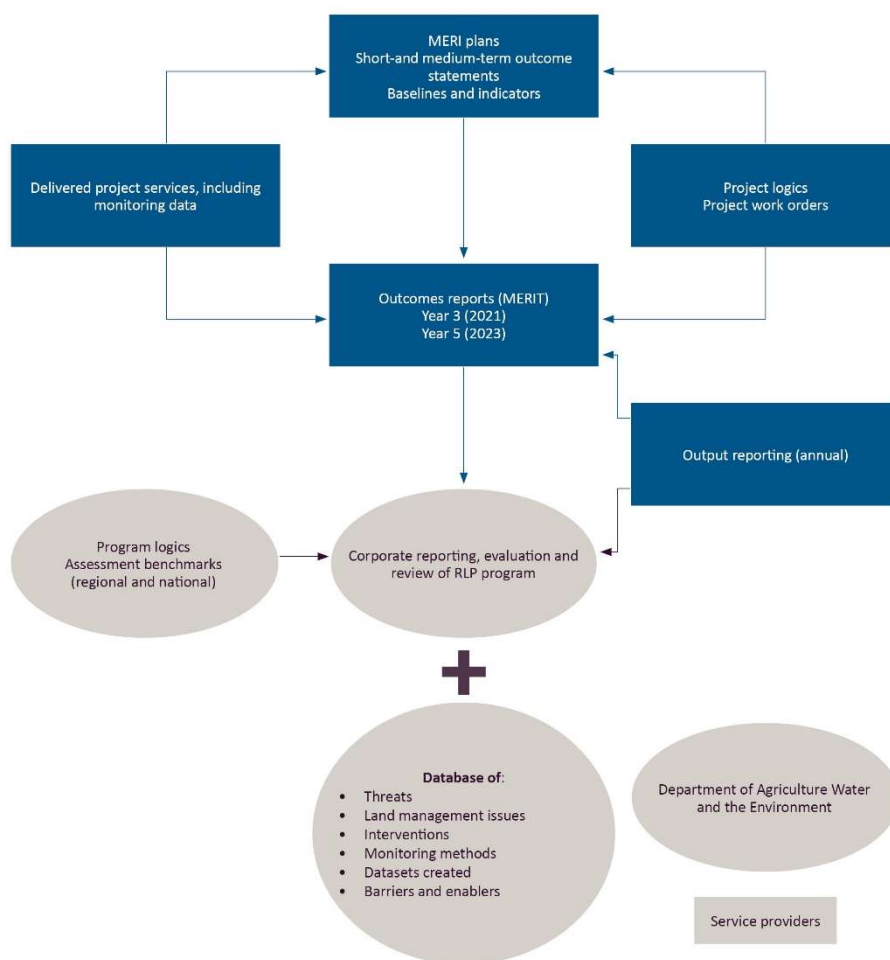
Under the [Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2014](#), projects funded by the Australian Government must be accountable. This requires program managers to track and report on program effectiveness and value for money. Key to this is reporting on the short-, medium- and long-term outcomes of a program. Outcome reporting is also used to inform program improvements, additional program phases and the design of new programs.

This reporting guide outlines:

- the purpose of outcome reporting
- how we use outcome reporting data to assess program effectiveness and improve future program design
- what you, as service providers, need to do
- the outcome reporting assistance the department will provide to you.

Figure 1 is an overview of the monitoring and evaluation elements of the department's programs and how these elements intersect.

Figure 1 Components of program-level evaluation for department-funded programs



MERI Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement. **MERIT** Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool. **RLP** Regional Land Partnerships.

Purpose of outcome reporting

Outcome reporting is essential to understanding how a program has performed. It enables service providers to:

- highlight key achievements
- reflect on key challenges and opportunities for improvement
- highlight factors that have supported or inhibited success.

Good program management relies on outcome reporting data that informs:

- program improvements
- a program's mid-term review and end of program evaluation.

Program reviews and evaluation contribute to accountability to the public and parliament. They also provide the evidence base to help governments make decisions and set priorities. Outcome reporting informs program direction and design and enhances program effectiveness. This cannot be done through the reporting of outputs alone. Some programs will also be required to report against key evaluation questions. This will further inform our understanding of the program's performance.

We understand that despite best efforts, not everything goes to plan with projects. It is critical that service providers use outcome reporting to highlight project achievements as well as challenges and lessons. This approach allows for adaptive management and necessary changes during the life of a program.

How we use information from service providers

We will use the data you provided in your outcome reporting to generate:

- a program-wide report
- project-specific reports at the program's mid- and end points
- any key thematic reports at the program level (as required).

These reports may be made publicly available on the department's website.

We will analyse outcome reporting data to:

- inform the success of a program and opportunities for improvement
- enable us to report to government on the progress of programs
- allow us to report against our corporate reporting requirements in the department's annual reports.

Outcome reporting data will also inform key themes or trends for further investigation during a program's mid-term reviews and end-of-program evaluation.

Criteria used to assess program progress

We will use the criteria listed in Table 1 to review and evaluate a program's progress and success against its objectives. These criteria are drawn from internationally recognised standards for assessing program performance. They have informed the key evaluation questions that we ask you as part of the outcome reporting requirements. We also use these criteria to guide program reviews and evaluation (for an example of program evaluation questions, see [Appendix E](#)).

Table 1 Program evaluation criteria

Evaluation theme	Program-level definition
Effectiveness	A measure of the extent to which a program, project or initiative has attained, or is expected to attain, its relevant objectives efficiently and in a sustainable way.
Appropriateness	A determination made through comparing the program with the needs of the intended beneficiaries using any of the techniques of needs analysis. Alternatively, the program could be evaluated in terms of its compliance with process.
Impact	A change in the condition of biophysical, social, economic and/or institutional assets. An impact may be positive or negative, primary or secondary, short-term or long-term, direct or indirect, and/or intended or unintended. Impacts are sometimes realised after the formal project is completed.
Efficiency	The notion of getting the highest value out of program or project resources.
Legacy	The enduring consequences of past investments, policies or actions that can be captured and/or bequeathed.

Source: OECD DAC (2019)

What service providers need to do

MERIT is our online program management reporting depository. It is designed to guide you through the outcome reporting process. The MERIT outcome forms contain questions on project progress against nominated outcome statements. Outcome statements are defined at the start of projects in individual monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement plans (MERI plans). For definitions of short-, medium- and long-term outcomes, see the [Glossary](#).

Terminology will vary slightly between environment and agriculture focused projects and programs to reflect different requirements. General themes, including the need for evidence, remain the same. In most instances, you will be asked to select answers from a drop-down menu. Other questions will require an open text response.

You will be required to answer questions about:

- progress of projects against established baselines for each outcome statement
- the level of achievement of an outcome statement using a criteria matrix ([Appendix B](#))
- key enablers and barriers to the success of their projects.

Depending on the scale or strategic significance of some programs, respondents may be asked to answer a list of key evaluation questions ([Appendix C](#)). These questions have been informed by the evaluation criteria ([Appendix E](#)).

You will also be required to provide a summary of the evidence you have collected (in the form of dataset summaries and raw data) against baselines to support your claims ([Appendix D](#)). For a flowchart of each program's mid-term outcome reporting, see [Appendix A](#).

Outcome reporting deadlines

Outcome reporting requirements will vary for each service provider, depending on the lifespan of the project.

For example, projects that have a lifespan of 5 years, such as the Regional Land Partnership (RLP) program, would be required to complete 2 outcome reports in MERIT (one at the mid-term point (3 years) and one at the end of the program (5 years). Alternatively, a 2-year project may only be required to complete a single outcome report (at 1 year).

Information on reporting requirements will be detailed in your MERIT plans.

In general, outcome reporting will be due at the end of each financial year (30 June) or towards the end date of each project (see your contract for details).

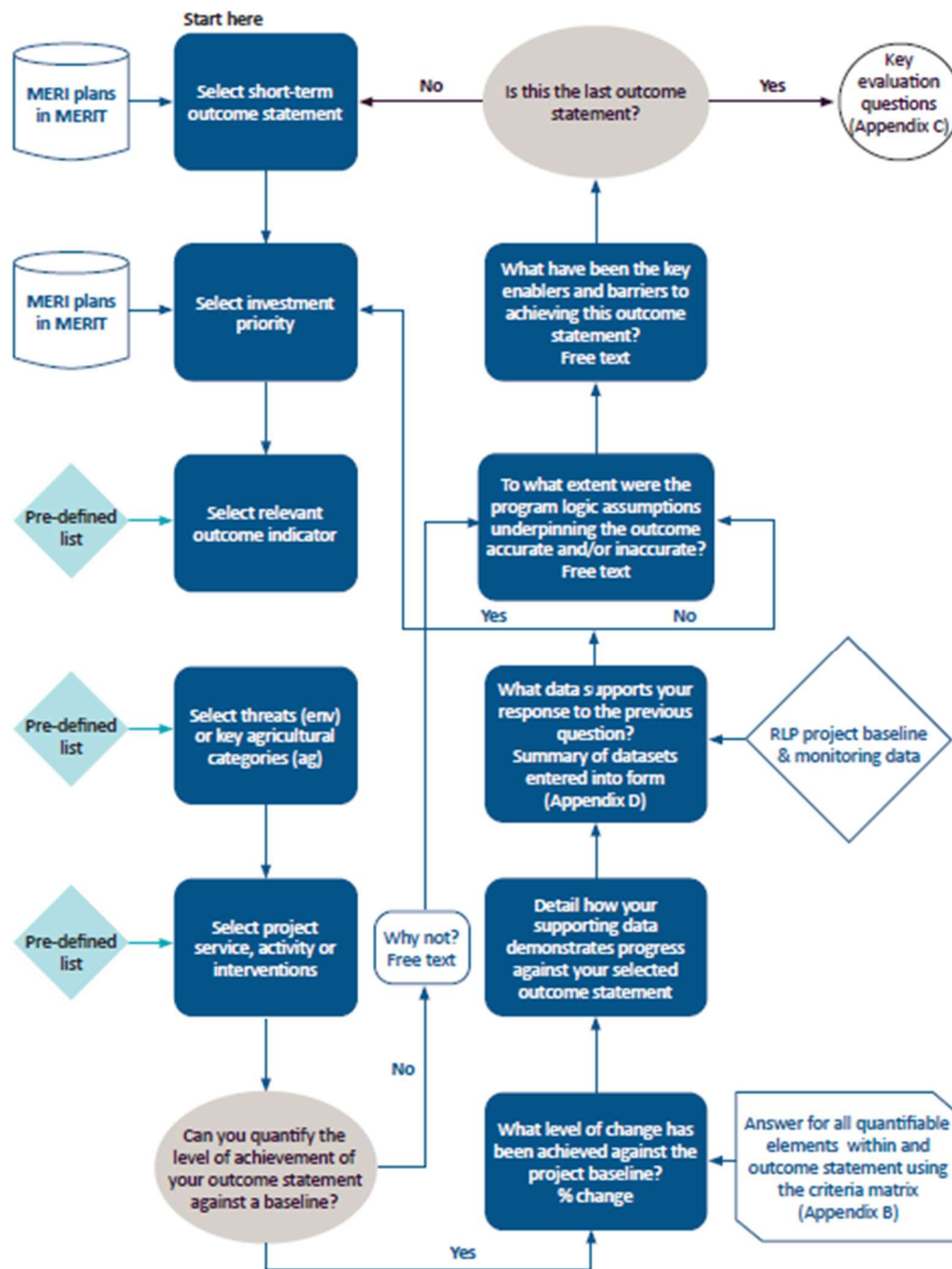
Support

We will support you throughout the outcome reporting process by providing:

- **outcome reporting forms** – available in MERIT before the reporting period begins
- **our updated MERIT user guide** – with a section on completing the outcome reporting form
- **online training sessions and support** – via the MERI Network GovTeams community
- **a helpdesk service** – email the MERI Team at MERIT@awe.gov.au

Appendix A: Mid-term reporting process

Figure A1 Mid-term review flowchart for Year 3 outcome reporting



ag Agricultural. **env** Environmental. **MERI** Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement. **MERIT** Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool. **RLP** Regional Land Partnerships.

Appendix B: Criteria matrix

Table B1 Criteria matrix based on best practise program evaluation criteria

Criteria	Significantly achieved (100 to 76%)	Satisfactorily achieved (75 to 51%)	Partially achieved (50 to 26%)	Inadequately achieved (25 to 1%)	Not achieved (0%)
Effectiveness	<input type="checkbox"/> Project has significantly achieved the outputs and targets expected at this point and is on track to achieve expected final outcomes.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project has satisfactorily achieved major outputs and targets expected at this point and is on track to achieve most expected final outcomes.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project has partially achieved required level of outputs and targets at this point and only has moderate chance of achieving expected final outcomes.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project has not adequately achieved outputs and targets expected at this point and is not on track to achieve expected final outcomes to satisfactory level.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project has not achieved outputs and targets at this point and will not achieve expected final outcomes.
Efficiency	<input type="checkbox"/> Project maximises outcomes from available time and resources. Investment is within budget and funds are being spent as planned. Interventions and governance arrangements maximise efficiency. Staff resources (and skills) are completely appropriate and support maximum efficiency.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project generally makes good use of time and resources in all major areas. Investment has sometimes deviated from planned budget, expenditure and/or timelines. Intervention and governance arrangements are generally strong and support good levels of overall efficiency. Staff resources (and skills) good and support overall efficiency, but there is room for improvement.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project makes appropriate use of time and resources in some areas. Investment has deviated from budget, and/or planned expenditure; timelines mainly within tolerable limits. Interventions and governance arrangements are moderately satisfactory, but more could be done to improve efficiency. Staff resources (and skills) adequate, but more could be done to improve these.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project not making appropriate use of time and resources in at least one major area. Investment has deviated from budget, and/or planned expenditure; timelines beyond tolerable limits. Likely other interventions and/or governance arrangements would better support efficient delivery of outcomes. Staff resources (and skills) inadequate to support intended outcomes.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project not making appropriate use of time and resources in several or all major areas. Investment has deviated completely from budget, and/or planned expenditure; timelines beyond tolerable limits. Interventions and/or governance arrangements highly inefficient. Staff resources (and skills) inadequate across several areas to support intended outcomes.
Legacy	<input type="checkbox"/> Benefits will endure in all/almost all areas beyond project life.	<input type="checkbox"/> Benefits will endure in a large number of major and minor areas beyond the life of the project.	<input type="checkbox"/> Benefits will endure in most areas; project does not fail in any major area.	<input type="checkbox"/> Benefits achieved are unlikely to endure in at least one major area.	<input type="checkbox"/> Few benefits have been achieved and/or these are unlikely to endure in most areas (major and minor).
Appropriateness	<input type="checkbox"/> Project and its delivery methods highly appropriate for supporting maximum outcomes, with very little to no need for change.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project and delivery methods mostly relevant and appropriate for supporting maximum outcomes, with some change needed.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project and delivery methods only partly relevant and appropriate for supporting maximum outcomes. Substantial number of changes required to improve relevance.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project and delivery methods largely inappropriate and have affected success of outcomes. Large change in overall approach needed.	<input type="checkbox"/> Project and delivery methods not appropriate and have prevented intended outcomes and/or led to unintended negative outcomes. Complete revision of approach needed.

Appendix C: Key evaluation questions

Table C1 Key evaluation questions for Regional Land Partnership program

Key evaluation questions	Answer format
1 To what extent are you progressing towards the medium-term project outcome?	Drop-down (%)
2 How, and to what extent, has the project increased knowledge of best practice natural resource management for the investment priority?	Free text
3 Were the methods/strategies used the best way to achieve/maximise the outcomes or are there other methods/strategies that might be more effective?	Free text
4 To what extent has the project risk assessment and risk management been appropriate and effective?	Free text
5 If your project engages with Traditional Owners, how and by what means has this project improved the capacity of Traditional Owners to lead or assist with the management of the investment priority?	Free text
6 Have there been any unexpected or unintended (positive or negative) changes or other outcomes delivered by this project and what are they?	Free text
7 What elements of the project could be improved to maximise efficiency (and value for money)?	Free text
8 Did this project receive funding from any other sources apart from the RLP program? If yes, please specify and the proportion of funding contributed to the project.	Free text
9 How, and to what extent, has the project achieved desired behavioural change and ongoing commitment among the participating land managers towards the investment priority?	Free text
10 What evidence is there that the outcomes will be maintained? How will they be maintained and by whom?	Free text
11 Is there any additional information or data you wish to provide that you have used to evaluate the success of the project?	Free text

Appendix D: Project dataset summary

This project dataset summary form will be used for several natural resource management programs in MERIT. As a result, some questions will be a repetition of content that is already in the system. Some questions will be prefilled once this form is in MERIT. You will have to answer these questions for each dataset collected for your project.

Table D1 Project dataset summary questions

Category	Question	Answer format
Title	1 Dataset title	Free text
Background	2 Project ID	Free text
	3 Project name	Free text
	4 What program does this dataset relate to?	Drop-down menu
Dataset description	5 What program outcome does this dataset relate to?	Drop-down menu
	6 What primary or secondary investment priority does this dataset relate to?	Drop-down menu
	7 Is this (a) a baseline dataset associated with a project outcome against which change will be measured; (b) a project progress dataset that is tracking change against an established project baseline dataset; or (c) a standalone foundational dataset to inform future management interventions?	Drop-down menu
	8 What types of measurements or observations does the dataset include?	Drop-down menu
Data collection	9 Identify the methods used to collect the data.	Drop-down menu
	10 Describe the method used to collect the data in detail.	Free text
	11 Identify any apps used during data collection.	Free text
	12 Provide a coordinate centroid for the area surveyed (for biophysical/ecological surveys where an app was not used, and where there are no sensitivities in providing a location).	Latitude and longitude in decimal degrees
	13 First collection date	Calendar
	14 Last collection date	Calendar, ongoing option
	15 Is this data an addition to existing time-series data collected as part of a previous project, or is it being collected as part of a broader or national dataset?	Drop-down menu and free text
Data accessibility	16 Who developed or collated the dataset?	Drop-down menu
	17 Has a quality assurance check been undertaken on the data?	Drop-down menu
	18 Has the data contributed to a publication?	Drop-down menu, including URL hyperlink to publication
	19 Where is the data held?	Drop-down menu
	20 For all public datasets, provide the published location. If stored internally by your organisation write 'stored internally'.	Free text, including URL hyperlink
	21 What format is the dataset?	Drop-down menu
	22 Are there any sensitivities in the dataset?	Drop-down menu
	23 Primary source of data (organisation or individual that owns or maintains the dataset)	Free text
	24 Dataset custodian (name of contact to obtain access to dataset)	Free text

Appendix E: Program evaluation questions

Table E1 Key evaluation questions, by theme

Evaluation theme	Key evaluation questions	Sub evaluation questions	Relevant level of program logic
Effectiveness	To what extent have the planned outcomes and outputs been achieved?	To what extent have project services (and any associated targets) been delivered?	Actions and outputs Outcomes
		To what extent have the identified outcomes been achieved (based on indicators to support delivery of project services)?	Outcomes
Appropriateness	<p>To what extent is the program aligned with the needs of the intended beneficiaries?</p> <p>To what extent is the program compliant with process and recognised best practice processes in the field (e.g. the type, level and context of investment and associated activities)?</p>	<p>As a delivery approach, were the foundational activities and management actions an appropriate way to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> align project delivery with community needs and expectations tailor the project to the needs of each site achieve identified outcomes? 	<p>Short-term outcomes</p> <p>Medium-term outcomes</p> <p>Activities</p>
Efficiency	<p>To what extent has the program attained the highest value out of available resources?</p> <p>How could resources be used more productively and efficiently?</p> <p>What could be done differently to improve implementation, and thereby maximise outcomes and impact, at an acceptable and sustainable cost?</p>	To what extent did the recovery effort demonstrate 'value for money' through the various projects and activities?	<p>Short-term outcomes</p> <p>Medium-term outcomes</p>
		How could resources have been used more productively and efficiently?	<p>Short-term outcomes</p> <p>Medium-term outcomes</p>
		What could be done differently to improve implementation, and thereby maximise impact, at an acceptable and sustainable cost?	<p>Short-term outcomes</p> <p>Medium-term outcomes</p>
Legacy	<p>Will the program's impacts continue over time and after the program ceases?</p> <p>How should the legacy be managed and by whom?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that the work completed to support identified outcomes will continue to be maintained?</p> <p>How likely is it that the outcomes achieved through the project services that were delivered will be sustained over time?</p>	Outcomes

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Impact	<p>In what ways and to what extent has the program contributed to changing asset conditions, management practices, and/or effectiveness of delivery?</p> <p>What, if any, unanticipated positive or negative changes or other outcomes have resulted?</p> <p>To what extent were the changes directly or indirectly produced by the program interventions?</p>	To what extent have the core and project services and short- and medium-term outcomes contributed to the longer-term outcomes?	Medium- to long-term outcomes
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Note: Evaluation questions derived from the *RMCG Regional Land Partnerships Evaluation Plan* (DEE 2018).

Glossary

Term	Definition
baseline	Starting point or reference data (for example, historical conditions) used for comparing the degree of change in a set of results.
benchmark	Desired states of indicators (objectives) used for comparing results in order to gauge effectiveness of NRM project services and investment.
habitat	The environment that supports a species, and particularly those features or attributes that determine where the species occurs.
indicator	A measurement or value that can be used to assess progress towards outcomes.
MERI	Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement
MERIT	Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool, the department's online program management reporting depository.
metadata	Data describing the monitoring data collected and generated (for example, a date, time and location stamp that sits behind an Excel spreadsheet or photograph).
natural resource management actions	Actions that lead to the protection and improvement of environmental assets such as soils, water, vegetation and biodiversity.
outcomes – short-term, medium-term and long-term	<p>Short-term outcomes (over years 1 to 3)</p> <p>All projects will have short-term outcomes. Although they represent a relatively short period, these outcomes are vital to the success of projects and programs.</p> <p>Medium-term outcomes (over years 3 to 5)</p> <p>For 5-year projects, these outcomes will also be the end-of-program outcomes. All 3- to 5- year projects will have medium-term outcomes, and these are to be reported on by the end date of the project.</p> <p>Long-term outcomes (year 5 and beyond)</p> <p>These outcomes are expected to emerge towards the end or well after the life of a project. Indicators will be used to measure progress towards these outcomes to confirm whether they are 'on track' to being achieved.</p>
primary or secondary investment focus	The primary focal assets or ecological values being addressed by a project, such as a threatened species or ecological community, Ramsar site or World Heritage site.
project services	Services, activities or outputs being provided by RLP projects. These include biophysical and non-biophysical (human) actions.
RLP	Regional Land Partnership
threats	Pressures, drivers and stressors being addressed by the project.
trajectories	Changes in indicators over time.

References

DEE 2018, [Regional Land Partnerships Evaluation Plan](#), Final Report prepared by RMCG for the Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra, accessed 12 March 2021.

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Further reading

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