

COMMUNIQUÉ
MARINE NATIONAL FACILITY STEERING COMMITTEE
MEETING #77: Friday, 4 September 2015

The 77th Marine National Facility Steering Committee (MNFSC) meeting was held in Hobart on 4 September. With the commissioning of *Investigator* now complete, the Steering Committee discussed a range of strategic issues such as the development of a new business model to maximise use of *Investigator* to its full 300 days per year potential and amendments to the MNF applications process to ensure that all science undertaken through the MNF is done so in the national benefit of Australia. Here I provide an overview of these discussions, and highlight the key actions and activities that will be undertaken by the MNF in the near future.

Investigator progress

The MNF officially took delivery of the *Investigator* on Monday, 4 August 2014, making the vessel just over one year old, and marking the completion of commissioning activities. During the past 12 months the vessel has completed a rigorous period of scientific equipment installation followed by a series of sea trials. The first of three scientific voyages for the 2014-2015 voyage schedule were then successfully undertaken in March. *Investigator* is now undergoing a rigorous port period in preparation for the upcoming voyages, including the development of an on-board fully-equipped medical surgery.

MNF scheduling

On Monday, 20 July 2015 the MNF launched a call for applications for single year applications in 2017-18 and multi-year applications from 2017-18 to 2019-20. Applications are now closed and the MNF are preparing them for assessment by independent external reviewers prior to the meeting of the Scientific Advisory Committee in late November.

Scientific Advisory Committee

Following the decision at SC #76 to appoint new members to the Scientific Advisory Committee Dr Ed Butler, Dr Andrew Heap and Dr Susan Wijffels have been appointed as voting members of the SAC for their respective disciplines, with Dr Joanne Whittaker also accepting an appointment as early career non-voting SAC member under the guidance of Dr Andrew Heap. Furthermore, Dr Neville Smith has also accepted his invitation to replace Prof Roger Bradbury as Chair of the SAC. On behalf of the MNF Steering Committee I would like to sincerely thank all outgoing members; Prof Roger Bradbury, Dr Bernadette Sloyan, Dr Kathy Burns and Dr Peter Harris for their significant contributions to the MNF applications process.

MNF Steering Committee governance

On 22 May 2015, the Minister for Industry and Science, the Hon Ian Macfarlane MP, wrote to the Chair of the CSIRO Board informing him that the appointment of the MNF Steering Committee members would be simplified in line with recommendation of the *National Commission of Audit Smaller and More Rational Government Reform Agenda* by reforming the Steering Committee as an advisory committee of the CSIRO Board. A revised Terms of Reference is currently under development and will be available via the MNF website in the near future.



National benefit of MNF research

As a keystone element of the nation's research infrastructure, the MNF must be operated as efficiently as possible and in the best interest of the nation. To this end steps have already been implemented via the recent call for applications process whereby the MNF included additional questions to better understand how science undertaken through the MNF would inform decision-making processes for Australia's national benefit, and to also understand how science teams intend to engage the full suite of end-users in their research. To help MNF scientists understand MNFSC expectations regarding these changes, it was agreed that the MNF would hold a series of information workshops over the coming 12 months, with times and dates to be communicated via the MNF blog (<http://csirofrvblog.com/>)

The MNFSC also further considered new approaches for assessing the national benefit of primary applications for sea time, to ensure that scientific research undertaken through the MNF provides key information to government, industry and other stakeholders to directly underpin the growth and sustainability of ocean-based industries for future generations. To achieve this the MNFSC has agreed to trial a new approach to assessing the national benefit of applications, via the establishment of a new sub-committee comprised of the Chairs of the MNFSC, MNF Scientific Advisory Committee, the National Marine Science Committee, and others as required. It is anticipated that this committee will be in place prior to the 2016 call for applications, and additional information about the committee including a Terms of Reference will be available shortly via the MNF website.

Calls for applications for sea time

Given the increased capacity and capability brought to the MNF by *Investigator*, demand for sea time among the Australian and international marine research community has seen unprecedented highs. Accordingly, to maximise the utility of *Investigator* into the future, the MNFSC considered a range of options for improving the efficiency of the MNF applications process to ensure that the maximum number of highly ranked voyages could be undertaken per annum. This included canvassing options such as amending the frequency in which calls for applications for sea time are made, for example, by maintaining an annual call for single year and Supplementary applications for sea time, while only calling for multi-year applications on a triennial basis.

On 1 May 2015 the MNF released via their website a consultation paper outlining these options, calling for feedback from stakeholders. This process ran for two weeks closing on 14 May 2015, and was advertised extensively through the MNF blog and other resources. In response to the community consultation process, 15 submissions were received from past, current and potential users of the MNF. These individuals spanned nine individual Australian research institutions. The MNFSC has considered this feedback, the outcomes of which will be communicated in a separate communique shortly.

MNF Business Model

Investigator has been designed for full-year operations (~300 sea days per year), and the Federal Government has encouraged the exploration of alternative users to utilise the additional capacity. To this end the MNF have already secured two Research Charters through the CSIRO Energy and CSIRO Oceans and Atmosphere Flagships to undertake research in the Great Australian Bight during existing gaps in the 2015-2016 voyage schedule. To help encourage future Research Charters the MNFSC also considered a set of guiding principles outlining the key requirements for access to *Investigator*, to provide clarity to potential users on their eligibility to conduct Research Charters and the key considerations relating to access. Additional discussion and consideration of this matter will be held during SC #78 in February 2016, with a view to release a set of guiding principles shortly after.

In conclusion

As we transition from commissioning year activities to our first full year of scientific operation, it is an exciting time for the MNF and our marine science community. While we do still face several challenges to ensure the maximum utility of *Investigator* within Australia's national benefit, the MNFSC believes that we stand in good stead to develop and grow the MNF to meet the demands of the scientific community, and to grow with them in response to future challenges facing our nation.

Dr Ian Poiner
Chair