

RN Breakfast 21 November 2025

Sally Sara: It's unclear what research will be lost at the CSIRO after the national science agency announced it will slash up to 350 jobs, the organisation is grappling with long term financial challenges as government funding has failed to keep pace with rising costs. Alex Hawke is The Shadow Minister for Industry and innovation, and joins me now. Alex Hawke, welcome back to Radio National breakfast. Good morning. Sally.

Sally Sara: How concerned are you about these cuts at the CSIRO?

Alex Hawke: Yeah, very concerned. I think we join a lot of the concern that's been echoed, even from Labor members like Ed Husic about why the government isn't being transparent about what's happening at the CSIRO. So we've heard about the 350 job cuts, but we've tried to seek some answers about, well, what research divisions and what science divisions are being cut in these job losses. And it's very hard to get information. The Minister, Tim Ayres, has been out talking about in some minor publications and some very rare interviews about nutrition or some areas of disaster management, but we can't find out why are we losing scientists and researchers at all from our premier science institution? It really, the government hasn't even put out a statement yet in relation to this.

Sally Sara: In the Coalition's view, which areas of research should be no go zones when it comes to cuts?

Alex Hawke: Well, we don't have a view on that. I think the CSIRO came to us in government, you know, there was a pandemic on we topped them up \$3 billion at that time. That was a \$3 billion additional investment that was needed. They were doing a lot of researching work, that was in 2021. So, you know, in the past, we've taken the view that the CSIRO needs a big top up. You top them up. Now the government has obviously received a funding request from the CSIRO and has said no, or we won't fund it, or we'll not provide the money. And it's up to them to explain what research and what science is going out of that and that non funding.

Sally Sara: You're talking about the coalition's record with the CSIRO. Is it important to note also that in the May 2014 budget, the Abbott government announced cuts of \$110 million, and staff levels were reduced by 20%. The chair of the CSIRO at that time, and Australian of the Year, Simon McKeon said that the organisation had been cut to the bone. Is that correct?

Alex Hawke: 11 years ago, yeah, I think there was, you know, in that budget, a different context. I think now, since then –

Sally Sara: What, what was the different context?

Alex Hawke: Well I think that, you know, you understand the context of the time, I don't think we need a history lesson about the Abbott government. But I do think you know, since then, subsequent governments have increased the funding for the CSIRO and topped them up when needed. And you know, the government now has to explain why they're cutting funding to the CSIRO and why we'd lose researchers at the moment.

Sally Sara: Some Coalition MPs have criticised the integrity of the CSIRO, for example, by diminishing the findings of the GenCost Report. Have some members of the Coalition been responsible for eroding some of the stature of the institution of the CSIRO?

Alex Hawke: I don't think so. I think you know, all science organisations, especially government funded ones, have to answer to parliamentary oversight, that will come in all shapes and sizes. People have a right, parliamentarians have a right, to ask questions and have them answered and make commentary. It doesn't diminish the view, I think Australians have a very high regard for the CSIRO. The Coalition has a high regard for the CSIRO, and we want to see it succeed.

Sally Sara: You're listening to Radio National Breakfast..

Melissa Clarke's comments:

Sally Sara: And we also heard from the Shadow Minister for Industry and innovation, Alex Hawke, on these cuts to the CSIRO, which are likely to result in around 350 jobs gone.

Melissa Clarke: Look, this is an interesting one, because it's difficult ground for the Coalition to argue on because their own record on support for the CSIRO is far from stellar. If we look at how this is playing out now, there are questions to be answered about precisely what the impact is going to be. The government can give priorities for the CSIRO and indicate what it wants the agency to focus on, but exact details of how operationally the CSIRO wants to work in the future is up to the agency. And as we heard from Doug Hilton on the program earlier in the week, they want to talk to staff first before going through that, so we're starting to hear some of the details dribble out. But in that accountability process, the Coalition has the problem of having previously pulled out funding from the CSIRO when they've wanted to make cuts across the budget. I think the pandemic time is quite different from standard approaches to governance of agencies. So we have seen a history of the Coalition look to cut back funding for the CSIRO. We have seen very loud criticism and politicisation of the CSIRO's work by members of the Coalition. Alex Hawke didn't seem willing to acknowledge that there were, whilst not all, members of the Coalition, multiple members of the coalition have have diminished the work of the CSIRO as an institution. And then there's also the appointments that have been made to the CSIRO, which have

been regarded as done with an eye to politics in the previous Coalition government. So, the ground on which the Coalition comes to the argument about protecting the CSIRO is a shaky one, but that, and in and of itself, doesn't diminish the need for transparency and more information about what is happening to our premier scientific institution.

Sally Sara: It's highly regarded by many members of the public, the CSIRO.

Melissa Clarke: And has played really crucial roles across I mean, a lot of though, you'll hear plenty of references to WiFi and AeroGarden and some of the really big inventions, but there's actually really critical work that's been done that people wouldn't be familiar with, things like the work that's been done in the agricultural sector around improving the yield of crops, which has had transformative effects for not only our agriculture industry, but for food production worldwide. So there's a lot of unsung work, as well as some of the higher profile results that will often get mentioned.