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Scientific head-to-head duel on Great Barrier Reef

THE raging debate over the health of the Great Barrier Reef and the impact of unchecked science on farmers will step onto an online stage to face a massive mainstream audience on Thursday 8 October.

Throwing down the gauntlet for a scientific duel to Dr Paul Hardisty, CEO of the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) is Great Barrier Reef expert and independent scientist Dr Peter Ridd.

Dr Ridd, who has researched the GBR for three decades, is challenging Dr Hardisty to a head-to-head debate over the real state of the Reef and the level of quality checking in marine science.

“Dr Paul Hardisty, Director of AIMS, step up and face the music,” said Dr Ridd. “It’s time we had the conversation in the public arena. This will be an academic duel that is long overdue.”

AIMS is the preeminent science organisation based on the Great Barrier Reef.

Since bursting into the public arena on SkyNews in 2018 when interviewed by Peta Credlin around the lack of quality assurance in GBR science, after which Dr Ridd was sacked by James Cook University, he has garnered a major following in the mainstream arena.

Today (Friday 4 September), he stood alongside farmer groups driving a #farmersfeedus campaign as they announced that in just 100 days a petition to establish an Office of Science Quality Assurance has gained 5,428 signatures across both urban and regional Australia. More than 3,450 of those have gone directly into an MP-sponsored petition that is to be tabled in the Queensland Parliament as early as 8 September. The petition also calls for the revocation of the Reef Regulations Amendment Act 2019, pushed through last September based on unchecked science.

The online forum will be sponsored by the Pioneer Cane Growers Organisation (PCGO), part the #farmersfeedus consortium that drove the petition.

Director of PCGO Max Musumeci said: “The Reef Regulations Amendment Act is based on unchecked science. This debate will bring into the community a robust discussion between AIMS and Dr Ridd over the facts around farming and the Great Barrier Reef. As Dr Ridd has said time and again, farming is NOT damaging the Great Barrier Reef, and as a farmer in the region adjacent to the Reef I can state quite categorically that we are the most committed custodians of the land and oceans on which we work, live and spend our leisure time.

“The use of unchecked science to drive political decision-making and legislation, including the 2019 Reef Regulations Amendment Act, is massively impacting ALL farming sectors – the farmers that Australians rely on for 89% of all food and drink on our tables today.”

Date: Thursday 8 October

Time: 4.30pm

Location: Townsville – heart of Great Barrier Reef academia

Who: GBR Scientist Dr Peter Ridd V Dr Paul Hardisty, AIMS

Format: Face-to-face with social isolation protocols, streamed on social media.

Topics:

- Sediment from farms on the GBR
- Pesticides and the GBR
- Nutrients and the GBR
- Coral growth rates on the GBR
- Quality Assurance of GBR science

Mr Musumeci added: “As Queensland goes to the polls on 31 October, the community needs to understand the truth around the Great Barrier Reef and the risk being posed by unchecked science to our farming industry.

“The various political parties also are being invited on 8 October to state their position on the future of the farming industry and the lack of quality assurance around the science used to make legislation, including the growing tide of Reef Regulations. This crosses all political boundaries.”

Dr Ridd and #farmersfeedus have an active social media profile on YouTube and Facebook, and will use those channels to share the forum with a wide audience while working within COVID social distancing requirements.

“The forum will be held in Townsville on 8 October, from 4.30pm, taking the battle around the health of the Great Barrier Reef to the heartland of GBR academia and the farmers’ fight,” Dr Ridd said.

“The Senate Inquiry held recently into the Reef Regulations imposed by the Queensland Government brought into the light a range of key information about data that needs to be examined in the public spotlight. In addition, the #farmersfeedus petition has shown the depth of feeling among the general public around the need for thorough checking of the science being used to make political decisions.

“We invite everyone across Australia to tune in to the forum on 8 October.”

About the forum:

There will be a structured format, with each of the debaters - Dr Ridd and Dr Hardisty – offered two periods of three minutes per topic.

The event will be moderated to strict time slots.

Invitees have been provided with a detailed invitation, including topics for discussion.

The topics will be:

- **Topic 1:** Sediment from farms: Question: How much damage has it caused and to what percentage of the coral?
- **Topic 2:** Pesticides: Question: How much damage to what percentage of the coral?
- **Topic 3:** Nutrients: Question: Is there a link between farm fertilizer and Crown-of-Thorns starfish?
- **Topic 4:** Coral growth rates: Question: Does agriculture affect coral growth rates?
- **Topic 5:** Quality Assurance of GBR science: Question: Do we need to check the science behind the 2017 Scientific Consensus Statement?

The format will invite questions and comments from the audience.

Other invitees:

- Minister for the Environment, Great Barrier Reef and Science Leeanne Enoch
- Shadow Minister for the Environment and Great Barrier Reef David Crisafulli
- Katter’s Australian Party (KAP) Leader and Traeger MP Robbie Katter
- LNP candidate for the seat of Townsville John Hathaway.
- Labor MP in the seat of Thuringowa Aaron Harper.
- Pauline Hanson’s One Nation member in the seat of Mirani Stephen Andrew.

Background:

Dr Ridd was a Professor at James Cook University (JCU) who hit a tidal wave of opposition when he started to dispute the conventional wisdom that climate change was “killing” the Reef, and told

Australia that there was no need for the government to be spending billions of dollars “fixing” a Reef that was healthy and thriving.

JCU sacked him, and Dr Ridd subsequently took the university to court, winning \$1.2m in compensation for unlawful sacking. The Federal Court overturned that win in a 2-1 decision and Dr Ridd responded by saying he would appeal to the High Court, and is preparing the case.

“My lawyers have carefully gone over the judgement, and believe there are numerous strong grounds for appeal to the High Court of Australia. We are re-opening the fundraising campaign and will carry on with the legal action,” he said after the Federal Court ruling.

“In the final analysis, I was fired for saying that, because of systemic problems with quality assurance, work from the JCU coral reef centre, which also publishes extensively on climate change, was untrustworthy. I believe what I said was true and have given plenty of published evidence to support the statement. After I was fired, it was proven beyond doubt that I was correct when a group of seven international scientists who audited eight of the major studies from the JCU coral reef centre found them ALL to be 100% wrong. You can’t get much more scientifically untrustworthy than that.”