Dear Dr Stone,

I am pleased to submit the Annual Report of the Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology for the financial year ended 30 June 2002. It reports on the Bureau’s discharge of its responsibilities under the Meteorology Act 1955 in its final year of operation with the dual status of a statutory body and part of a department. As from 1 July 2002, the Bureau is no longer a part of the Department of the Environment and Heritage, having been established, from that date, as an Executive Agency under Part 9 of the Public Service Act 1999. In this situation, and following its subsequent prescription for the purposes of the Financial Management and Accountability (FMA) Act 1997 with effect from 12 September 2002, future annual reports covering both the Bureau’s performance of its statutory functions under the Meteorology Act and its activities as an Executive Agency will be submitted in line with Section 70 of the Public Service Act.

It is appropriate, therefore, that I report on the Bureau’s performance over the past year in the context of the administrative arrangements that have operated over the twenty-four years that I have carried the dual responsibilities of Director of Meteorology under Section 5 of the Meteorology Act and Second Division/Senior Executive Service officer in the Bureau’s parent department. In doing so, I wish to acknowledge my own indebtedness for the trust, moral support and wise counsel that I received from a long succession of Departmental Secretaries whose sensitivity to the unique role of the Bureau on the national scene has been a defining factor in enabling it to remain focussed on meeting its important statutory responsibilities to the community through several cycles of management fashion and in the face of often intense pressures for inappropriate and potentially damaging policy and organisational change.

In my letter of transmittal of last year’s annual report, I identified what I believe to have been the major factors that have made it possible to maintain the basic concept of operation of the Bureau and steady growth in the quality and quantity of its output over the past decade despite the continuing decline in resource inputs and the burgeoning demands of legal and administrative process associated with the introduction of accrual budgeting and accounting and other Service-wide developments in management practice. In taking stock of the operation of the Bureau during the past year in the context of its development strategy over recent decades, I must also acknowledge the impact of the former Meteorology Policy Committee (MPC) and, in particular, of one of its members, Mr G L Hollings AM, who insisted on the reintroduction of annual reporting to the Minister on the state of the Bureau as an essential mechanism for Parliamentary and public accountability and as a safeguard against repeat of the insidious rundown of the national meteorological infrastructure through the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this context, I welcome the prospect of reconstitution of an external advisory mechanism to the Parliamentary Secretary and the Director of Meteorology following the Prime Minister’s recent approval for establishment of the Bureau of Meteorology Advisory Board.

The past year has seen a continuation of generally high standards of performance of most of the Bureau’s basic functions and services and significant progress with several major initiatives aimed at improved and enhanced services in the future. With the continuing rapid growth in community use of information from the national weather radar network, the Bureau’s web site is now firmly established as the most frequently
accessed government web site in the country. And, for an organisation which has always given more attention to the quality and usefulness of its service to the community than to its own institutional image and profile, the level of public awareness and satisfaction with the work of the Bureau remains extremely high.

The Bureau has, however, for many years, found it necessary to draw heavily on the professional commitment and intellectual capital built up in earlier times in order to maintain the volume and quality of its outputs. Systems developed by staff who are now retired, or on the verge of retirement, have enabled it to deliver far more and far higher quality services to the community with some 500 staff fewer than the 1800 who made up the Bureau a quarter of a century ago. The breadth of experience, professional capabilities and institutional commitment of the present-day staff of the Bureau are amongst the best in the world. But the scientific, technological and policy complexity of meteorological service provision has increased enormously over the past twenty-five years and the available staff are loaded too heavily and spread too thinly to maintain the depth and breadth of expertise needed to ensure world-class weather and climate services into the future. If the Bureau is to continue to meet community expectations for state-of-the-art meteorological services over the next decade, a new period of investment in staffing and technological modernisation is essential and urgent.

While the prospects for sound future development of the Bureau have been greatly enhanced by the more robust economic and public policy framework for meteorology that has emerged from the various reviews of recent years, it will be important that ways be found to build on these new opportunities and avoid the diversion of effort to administrative and legal process at the expense of the capability for sound planning and management of the essential professional functions of the Bureau. It will be important, also, to find ways of ensuring that the growing community trend towards blame-seeking and litigation not so constrain the ability of the Bureau to provide useful services to the public that the overall benefit of the national investment in its operations is impaired. In particular, it will be essential that the user community understand that the inherently chaotic nature of the atmosphere means that weather and climate forecasting will never be perfect and that, while the prospects for continued gradual improvement in forecast time range and reliability remain extremely bright, many of the Bureau’s outputs must continue to be seen for what they are – the best professional judgements that can be made, against very tight deadlines, on the basis of incomplete information and without the benefit of hindsight, about the inherently unknowable future behaviour of the atmosphere.

In presenting you with this report on the activities, achievements and performance of the Bureau through 2001-02, I wish to place on record my gratitude to the staff of the Bureau for all the dedicated work that goes on behind the scenes to maintain the quality of Australian’s meteorological operations and services; and my pride in their performance, most recently evidenced, if not so publicly visible, through the Bureau-wide meteorological support for the fire-fighting operations over the thirty-day period of the New South Wales bushfires of ‘Black Christmas’ 2001. Whether it be in terms of lives saved through actions based on timely warnings or the myriad social, environmental and economic benefits of decisions influenced by reliable meteorological information and advice, I believe the Government’s investment in the Bureau has served the nation extremely well over the past year and the past century. I look forward with confidence to the exciting scientific and technological developments and opportunities that will enable the Bureau to deliver still greater value to the Australian community as it begins its second century of operation on 1 January 2008.

Yours sincerely

JOHN W ZILLMAN
DIRECTOR OF METEOROLOGY

8 October 2002