

Search:

- 
- [Radio](#)
- [TV](#)
- [Shop](#)
- [News](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Local](#)
- [Children](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [more Topics](#)
- [help](#)

THE 7:30 REPORT

Turnbull under fire for \$10m water deal

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Broadcast: 19/11/2007

Reporter: Greg Hoy

Malcolm Turnbull is fighting for his political life and now another battle is brewing; a \$10 million grant given to a local company to investigate Russian rainfall technology has been questioned and criticised by water experts. So why has the Environment Minister taken such a gamble during an election?

Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN: Few MPs would have worked harder to defend their seats at this election than Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whose blue ribbon Sydney seat of Wentworth is under siege not just from Labor but a range of environmental activists mostly coalescing around the Greens. But in the second week of the campaign, Mr Turnbull found the time to announce that the Government, already in caretaker mode, would bankroll to the tune of \$10 million the investigation of an untried Russian technology that aims to trigger rainfall from the atmosphere, even when there are no clouds. It's a decision that raised the eyebrows of water experts around the country. Mr Turnbull's office says there's no breach of caretaker protocol because the project was actually approved before the election was announced. It's described as "rainfall enhancement technology" and is said to electro-charge the atmosphere to milk unseen moisture from the skies.

Greg Hoy reports.

GREG HOY: Call him the Rain Man, and how apt. Two weeks after the election was called, Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull bet \$10 million taxpayers' dollars, plus \$1 million GST he could make it rain, even when there are no clouds. He did so by bankrolling research into a mysterious ionisation technology promoted by the Australian Rain Corporation. And after a commercial trial by a waste water centre at Queensland University left independent experts like emeritus professor Neville Fletcher of ANU a little unconvinced.

NEVILLE FLETCHER, PHYSICIST, ANU: I think the conclusion was, and I might even quote that it said "there is no evidence to show that the technology does not work". Now that's a little bit negative. So I don't know. I thought that that was - inconclusive is about where I'd put it.

GREG HOY: Other rainmakers are less kind, like the father of cloud seeding in Australia for the Tasmanian hydro scheme, Ian Searle.

IAN SEARLE, FMR MGR, CLOUDSEEDING HYDRO TASMANIA: I've had to grapple with all sorts of strange ideas in my 36 years of cloud seeding.

GREG HOY: Or Israel's internationally respected cloud physicist, Professor Daniel Rosenfeld.

DANIEL ROSENFELD, CLOUD PHYSICIST, HEBREW UNIVERSITY: Here there is no single scientific paper, only the patterns. And one can patent (phonetic) anything claiming it's to do anything that he likes, as long as no one else has made the same claims before.

IAN SEARLE: The one that is being touted at the moment sounds very similar to a group in the USA called the Cloudbusters, and they're supposed to ionise the atmosphere in order to make clouds out of blue skies and then to produce rain from those clouds. But all the literature that I have seen shows it to be a bogus science.

GREG HOY: Electrification of the ionosphere to create clouds out of thin air. Certainly sounds a lot like the secret Australian rain device - no photographs allowed - that so excited the Minister and those who will share his six-month \$10 million research funding. All for a company the minister says is Australian owned, though we found it's actually 75 per cent Swiss owned. Our requests for interviews with Malcolm Turnbull, the head of the Australian Rain Corporation, the head of the centre contracted to test the device were declined. So, too, the head of the National Water Commission, which insisted on a presentation of the technology for local physicists. The rain corporation presented research documents written in Russian explained by a Russian researcher who spoke to local experts in Russian.

NEVILLE FLETCHER: It's kind of difficult, because he didn't speak English or understand English, so we didn't get a lot of information there, and as I said, such written information as they had was all in Russian. So couldn't get anything out of that.

GREG HOY: The physicists recommended more scientific work be done at no great expense before proceeding with any trial, which may then be worthwhile, they said. But Mr Turnbull decided the trial should proceed and authorised a \$10 million payment.

IAN SEARLE: We're in the middle of an election campaign. I can't put any other complexion on an act like that. In fact, I'm really astonished that the National Water Commission allowed it to pass.

GREG HOY: It's true that in the largely blue ribbon seat of Wentworth in Sydney's east, Mr Turnbull is struggling for re-election, though struggling might not be the right word. He does have a distinct advantage.

GEOFFREY COUSINS, BUSINESSMAN: I have never seen the weight of spending in any one seat that Malcolm Turnbull is putting out in Wentworth. It must be well over \$1 million just in this one seat, and in Australia, that's an extraordinary amount of money. I mean, it's starting to get like the American elections.

GREG HOY: Emanating from affluent suburbs like Vaucluse, Rose Bay and Watson's Bay, Malcolm Turnbull's fundraising group the Wentworth Forum, includes a long list of generous donors including Frank Lowy, Ros Packer, John Simons, and this man, Matt Handbury, chairman and part owner of the so called Australian Rain Corporation, beneficiary of the Minister's funding. Matt Handbury is the wealthy nephew of Rupert Murdoch and chairman and proprietor of Murdoch Books, which is the headquarters for Australian Rain Corporation.

The 7.30 Report, put to Malcolm Turnbull the following questions: has Matt Handbury's contribution to your fundraising Wentworth Forum helped in securing funding for the Australian Rain Corporation?

"There is absolutely no connection," he said "That is an outrageous suggestion".

Secondly, why couldn't the Matt Handbury Swiss consortium pay for its own research?

Response: "The company is contributing finding to the research and trial."

Our final question to the Minister was why should this not be seen as securing funding for one of your electorate supporters ahead of an election the Government is tipped to lose?

Mr Turnbull did not directly answer this question, suggesting perhaps his first answer had.

"The Australian Government is open to new and innovative approaches to secure water," he said.

Previously Malcolm Turnbull was dubious of the age old practice of rain enhancement by aerial seeding clouds with salt particles to help rain drops form.

IAN SEARLE: We expect rain to fall 30 minutes or 45 minutes after the seeding is done. We measure the rainfall on the ground.

GREG HOY: In a six-year \$20 million State Government trial, 20 per cent federally funded, the Snowy Hydro Scheme has been experimenting with similar cloud seeding burners mounted on mountain tops.

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE, SNOWY HYDRO SCHEME: Cloud seeding is an effective method for increasing snowfall.

GREG HOY: But Mr Turnbull's March press release raised doubts, stating: "Cloud seeding is effective only in a limited number of weather conditions... It requires existing clouds. It will not produce rain out of thin air... An American research institute concluded there was no conclusive scientific proof that cloud seeding works.

IAN SEARLE: It is, in fact, quite untrue. In Tasmania the results have been highly favourable from the beginning. We've been going since 1964.

GREG HOY: Passing clouds. A respected world expert on cloud physics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Professor Daniel Rosenfeld believes pollution particles illuminated in these satellite images are inhibiting rainfall over Australia's most populated areas and beyond. More specialised cloud seeding could help, he says, if only it could win the support of Australia's Environment Minister, who the Israeli say has instead directed scarce funding from the Australian water fund to Mr Handbury's corporation.

ARON GINGIS, ISRAELI CLOUD SEEDING PROJECT: \$11 million, it's a lot of money. \$11 million we could do, produce a lot of run-offs. You could say that his decision wasn't influenced by the association of Matt Handbury with Wentworth Forum, I don't believe it. It's my opinion.

GREG HOY: The local representative of the Israeli cloud seeding project in Australia is Aron Gingis.

ARON GINGIS: When I brought it to the attention of Ken Matthews, chief executive officer of National Water Commission, well, if you're giving this company this kind of serious money, why couldn't we apply? And then he suggested clearly to me that "Look, it's no point applying because Australian water fund had been expanded". In other words, the money had been spent. So when I argue with him - not argued but suggested to him, well, if the money was spent, where did you find this \$11 million? And he suggested to me clearly that this money was especially allocated to the National Water Commission by Minister Turnbull, a special allocation for this specific project. And to me it sounds, you know, bewildering.

GREG HOY: There's a lot riding on this \$10 million bet by the Rain Man. If he can silence the sceptics and make it rain, even when there are no clouds on the horizon, he will be hailed as a visionary and a hero. If it's found the sceptics are right and this technology does not work, the thunder will reverberate across the country.

DANIEL ROSENFELD: If he claims that the conventional method is unproven technology, so much more so he should be very careful with the really baseless technology.

IAN SEARLE: Frankly, I was astonished to go for something that is quite unproven, quite untried, and you could do wonderful things with that money.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Greg Hoy with that report.

Search the 7.30 Report

Video

Turnbull under fire for \$10m water deal

Windows Media [Broadband](#) [Dial-up](#)

Real Player [Broadband](#) [Dial-up](#)

Turnbull battles for Wentworth

Windows Media [Broadband](#) [Dial-up](#)

Real Player [Broadband](#) [Dial-up](#)

Images



Related Stories

[Turnbull battles for Wentworth](#) (7.30 Report)

Related Links

[Antony Green's Election Guide](#)

[Australia Votes 2007](#)

[Unleashed - Election Edition](#)