



18th Meeting of EPHC

Communiqué

22 May 2009

Breakthrough on waste

Australian environment ministers made fundamental progress on the national management of waste, chemicals and water at the 18th meeting of the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) in Hobart.

Council renewed its support for the development of an ambitious national waste policy by the end of 2009. It agreed to release a draft framework for the national policy, which will draw on the input of stakeholders, for public comment during June and July. The Waste policy will be finalised at the Council Meeting in November. The policy will establish a new national vision and direction for waste for the first time since 1992.

Ministers committed to finalising product stewardship arrangements for tyres, computers and televisions at its next meeting in November 2009. Ministers supported development of a national e-waste product stewardship system, and welcomed the results of the ground breaking choice modelling study on computers and televisions. The study shows that the community has a high willingness to pay for recycling end of life televisions and computers. Council asked that this study be released for public consultation in July as part of a consultation Regulation Impact Statement. Ministers thanked the TV and computer industries for their significant contribution to the process to date and their ongoing commitment to a national scheme to manage the recovery and recycling of end-of-life TVs and computers in Australia.

Council supported a project led by the Australian Government to establish partnerships with industry to increase recycling of mercury containing lamps in Australia. With federal funding of up to \$500,000 over 3 years, the 'Fluoro-cycle' scheme will be delivered jointly by the Lighting Council Australia and the Australian Government, in collaboration with the Property Council, the Facility Management Association of Australia, the Australian Council of Recyclers, the Australian Local Government Association and other key bodies. The voluntary scheme will target key generators of mercury containing lighting waste through an outreach program to recruit them to the scheme and establish suitable recycling arrangements. The scheme will target the commercial and public lighting sectors. A related initiative is being developed to recycle compact fluorescent lamps from the domestic sector.

In what constitutes a groundbreaking new role for EPHC, it welcomed a decision by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to close a significant gap in environmental protection by giving the Council a single decision-making role on the environmental management of chemicals, to be applied consistently in all jurisdictions. Council endorsed in-principle the establishment of an independent expert body, the Environmental Chemicals Bureau, to advise Council on standard-setting.

Endorsement by EPHC of the national guidelines for water recycling including for Managed Aquifer Recharge and Stormwater Harvesting and Re-Use will mean that water supply managers now have expert guidance on what water can be captured and used to supplement existing water sources. Another important activity initiated by ministers today was the development of national guidelines for the management of drought-triggered Acid Sulfate Soils in inland fresh water wetlands, an increasing critical issue in Australia today.

Council also welcomed the Australian Government's proposal to include four prominent national properties in an initial World Heritage Tentative List for possible future inscription onto the World Heritage list. The initial Tentative List will be submitted in late 2009 and will include Cape York, West MacDonnell Ranges, Cooloola Extension to Fraser Island and the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia Extension.

HERITAGE

Enhancing Cooperation on Heritage

Council agreed to a revitalised and expanded Cooperative National Heritage Agenda as the basis for enhanced national cooperation on heritage issues.

World Heritage Governance Intergovernmental Agreement

Council welcomed the initial report from the Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee (AWHAC), agreed to revised Terms of Reference clarifying AWHAC's important role in providing advice on Indigenous issues, and agreed to appoint several new and replacement members to AWHAC. It was also agreed the Chair of Council would write to the Australian Research Council highlighting the need for better targeted research for Australia's World Heritage properties. Council noted that a World Heritage Intergovernmental Agreement will be provided for its consideration in November 2009.

World Heritage Tentative List

EPHC endorsed the Commonwealth's proposal to include the following four properties in an initial Tentative List to be submitted in late 2009: Cape York (Qld), West MacDonnell Ranges (NT), Cooloola Extension of the existing Fraser Island World Heritage Area to include the mainland opposite and the small strait between, and an extension to the existing Gondwana Rainforests of Australia to include additional areas within the same geographic range of NE New South Wales and SE Queensland largely contiguous with the existing World Heritage Area. **Extensive consultation will now follow with stakeholders.** Australian Government officials are continuing to consult jurisdictions on possible future inclusions on the Tentative List, including with the Victorian Government on the way forward with its submission for the Victorian Goldfields. EPHC noted that following these discussions there will be a subsequent discussion by Council in late 2010/early 2011 of other properties that might be included in an update to Australia's Tentative List.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Australian Transport Council/EPHC Vehicle Fuel Efficiency Report

Council noted a package of measures that have the potential to significantly improve the fuel efficiency of the Australian road transport sector. The measures, contained in the final report of the joint EPHC/Australian Transport Council Vehicle Fuel Efficiency Working Group, included a recommendation to undertake a regulatory impact assessment for a mandatory CO₂ emission target for new light vehicles. Council referred the final report to the COAG National Strategy for Energy Efficiency Working Group for further consideration at its next meeting, as part of the broader energy efficiency package.

Carbon Capture and Storage Guidelines

Ministers approved the Environmental Guidelines for Carbon Dioxide Capture and Geological Storage, promoting a comprehensive and nationally consistent approach to environmental assessment of carbon dioxide capture and storage in geological formations. The Guidelines will assist the states and territories manage the environmental risks posed by this emerging technology, and will also assist the work of the Global Carbon Capture and Storage Institute launched by the Prime Minister on 16 April 2009.

Green Jobs Initiative

Council discussed the range of programs currently being implemented across all jurisdictions to support Australia's transformation to a low carbon economy by in particular increasing access and training in new 'green collar' jobs and new green skills in existing jobs. This will provide a key part of the response to both the global financial crisis and climate change and is an important dimension of EPHC work. Council agreed to monitor work in this area to ensure that synergies between programs are maximised and jurisdictions work cooperatively to make the most efficient and effective use of resources to deliver support programs to the Australian workforce.

WASTE MANAGEMENT

National Waste Policy

As well as renewing its support for the development of the national waste policy, Council noted that the National Waste Policy Consultation Paper had been released for public comment during April. A series of public meetings were held during April and May. The public meetings covered major cities and regional centres and were attended by some 450 business, community, environment and government stakeholders.

The draft framework, that Council agreed will be released for public comment in June and July, will incorporate the themes brought out in public consultation, such as a national product stewardship approach, valuing waste as a resource, dealing with organic waste and the potential to reduce the amount of waste in the commercial and industrial sectors. Council also noted the need to address the different and sometimes unique needs of regional and remote communities which had come to the fore during public consultations.

On the key area of product stewardship, Council agreed to finalise product stewardship arrangements for tyres, computers and televisions at its next meeting in November 2009.

Product Stewardship

Ministers agreed that the Product Stewardship Framework would be a key input into product stewardship deliberations as part of the National Waste Policy development process.

Computer and Television Product Stewardship

Ministers supported the establishment of a national product stewardship approach for e-waste and welcomed preliminary findings in studies tabled today that showed the community is willing to pay for e-waste recycling.

They asked that the detailed cost benefit analysis be finalised for public consultation in July. The final proposal will be considered at the next meeting of Council in November 2009. Ministers thanked the TV and computer industries for their significant contribution to the process to date and their ongoing commitment to seeing a national scheme in place to effectively manage the recovery and recycling of end-of-life TVs and computers in Australia.

Ministers also noted in particular the use of choice modelling to determine the community's willingness to pay. It is the first time this methodology has been used to put a value on the community's desire to see increased levels of recycling and represents a major step forward in the valuation of non-market impacts and benefits.

Beverage Container Deposit

A Beverage Container Investigation Report, was considered by Council today. The report provided an assessment of potential options for national measures, including container deposit legislation, to address resource efficiency, environmental impacts and the reduction of litter from packaging wastes such as beverage containers.

Council agreed to conduct a community attitudes survey on preparedness to pay for a container deposit scheme. Council will then consider whether to progress to a full regulatory impact statement with the benefit of this work. Council agreed that the work on the National Packaging Covenant would be strengthened to include additional focus on workplace and public place recycling and litter reduction programs. The Beverage Container Investigation Report, peer review, consultants' response to the peer review and a covering statement from the Beverage Container Working Group are available on the EPHC website (www.ephc.gov.au).

Ministers acknowledged the work of the consultants in preparing the final report. Ministers also acknowledged the input of the Stakeholder Reference Group, noting the divergent views of the various represented stakeholders. Ministers thanked representatives for their valuable contributions to the process.

National Packaging Covenant

Council noted the framework prepared by the National Packaging Covenant Council (NPCC) outlining a future National Packaging Covenant arrangement for possible implementation after 30 June 2010, and the issues put forward by key NPCC stakeholders from industry, local government and non government sectors. Council noted that the Covenant will co-exist with other regulatory measures and requested that the NPCC continue developing and drafting a new Covenant for consideration by Council at its next meeting in November 2009, ensuring that the redrafted Covenant contains well developed protocols for the evaluation of the performance of individual members.

Council also requested consultation with NPCC to develop arrangements to extend the existing Covenant for up to one year (to 30 June 2011) for consideration at its meeting in November 2009. This will provide certainty for signatories in the event that a new Covenant is not ready for implementation by 1 July 2010.

Movement of Controlled Waste NEPM

Ministers initiated a review of the Movement of Controlled Waste Between States and Territories NEPM. The review will be the second review of the NEPM. The first, carried out in 2003, revealed the NEPM was operating very well ensuring sound environment practice in the interstate transportation of controlled wastes and only a minor variation was required. The second review will commence in June 2009 and is expected to be completed in 2010.

WATER QUALITY

Australian Guidelines for Water Recycling Phase Two

Ministers endorsed guidelines for Managed Aquifer Recharge and Stormwater Harvesting and Re-use. The guidelines have previously been endorsed by the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council and are currently being considered for endorsement by the National Health and Medical Research Council. These guidelines are the final modules of Phase Two of the Australian Guidelines for Water Recycling, being developed as part of the National Water Initiative. Phase One was endorsed by environment, natural resource management and health ministers in November 2006.

The guidelines apply the risk management framework outlined in Phase 1 of the Guidelines to the harvesting and re-use of stormwater and storage of water in the aquifer. The expert guidance will provide water supply managers with further options to ensure that water that would otherwise have not been used, and in some instances cause damage to receiving waters, can be captured and used to supplement existing water sources.

National Water Quality Management Strategy - Review of NWQMS Guideline 4 (Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality 2000)

Council agreed to commence work on a revised edition of the Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality. The Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality play a vital role in the management of water quality in both Australia and New Zealand, providing methods for setting limits on pollutant concentrations in freshwater, coastal and marine environments.

The revised Guidelines will incorporate new data on a wide range of contaminants, toxic chemicals, and physical and chemical stressors. This will enable water managers to set appropriate thresholds for protecting water quality in different types of water bodies. The revision will be overseen by Australian and New Zealand Governments and is expected to take three years to complete.

National Guidance on the Management of Acid Sulfate Soil Issues

The development of a benchmark document to provide national guidance for the management of drought-triggered Acid Sulfate Soils (ASS) in inland fresh water wetlands was also endorsed by Ministers today. The effect of ASS on water quality is an emerging issue of concern in natural resource management. Significant natural assets including Ramsar wetlands and biodiversity listed under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 are currently affected by issues related to ASS. Improper management of ASS could also risk infrastructure, urban assets, primary industries and public amenity. The development of the national guidance documents for ASS will be overseen by a Joint Steering Committee. States and territories in collaboration with the Australian Government will provide technical expertise, data and information to inform the development of the national guidance.

AIR QUALITY

Diesel Vehicle Emissions NEPM

A recent review of the National Environment Protection Measure for Diesel Vehicle Emissions confirmed the Measure's effectiveness as part of an integrated suite of strategies for managing emissions from diesel vehicles and recommended minor improvements to the Measure. The Council acted on the review recommendations and made a minor variation to the Measure that will enhance its effectiveness.

CHEMICALS

Productivity Commission Report into Chemicals and Plastics Regulation

COAG has endorsed in principle a model for a proposed Environmental Chemicals Bureau: a lean, cost effective risk management body for making recommendations to the EPHC on chemicals in the environment. Establishing this body will close a significant gap in the current arrangements for environmental protection and will provide a consistent national approach to managing chemical risks in the environment. Consultation will be undertaken through 2009 on the proposed model to support the establishment of the Environmental Chemicals Bureau.

ABOUT THE EPHC

The Environment Protection and Heritage Council comprises ministers from all Australian states and territories, as well as the Australian, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea governments. It aims to ensure that governments work together with communities to achieve and enhance a healthy natural and cultural environment in harmony with social and economic goals.

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