

Professor Peter Newman
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Dear Peter

EPA Submission to the State Sustainability Strategy

I am writing in response to the State Government's invitation to prepare written submissions on *Focus on the Future: Opportunities for Sustainability in Western Australia*, December 2001 - I would like to advise on how the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) can facilitate the implementation of the State Sustainability Strategy in a number of key areas.

As Chairman of the EPA, I welcome the State Governments commitment to implementing the State Sustainability Strategy in Western Australia and encourage the integrated and coordinated approach to incorporating the principles of sustainability, currently engaged in the Strategy.

A major role of the EPA is to provide advice as to how the environment should be protected before development decisions are made through environmental impact assessments. It does this by providing high level, independent advice to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage (and to others, such as proponents), so that environmental concerns can be properly considered. The approval of proposals and environmental conditions on developments are made by the Minister; the Minister may take into account broader considerations particularly concerning economic and social issues. In providing its advice, the EPA has moved to evaluating, in appropriate circumstances, sustainability aspects of development proposals.

Through the undertaking of environmental impact assessment of proposals, the EPA is able to evaluate proposals against known policy and criteria as well as develop environmental policy positions based on specific environmental issues. This will be enhanced with the implementation of amendments to the Environmental Protection Act 1986, which will focus on strategic assessments, often expected at a pre-development stage. Environmental impact assessment is a key tool to reviewing, and has significant but not complete legislative scope to address, sustainability issues.

By articulating the role of the EPA and its current agenda, the Authority believes that it will be able to assist the Government and the community in further clarifying the role that the EPA can have in a sustainability-focussed world. To this end, the EPA is preparing a Position Statement on sustainability and has engaged Professor Ian Lowe in this regard. The Position Statement is being prepared in close consultation with your office.

The State Sustainability Strategy outlines a vision for attaining a high quality of life for all Western Australians, following detailed consultations with the community. It is envisaged that this commitment to sustainability will lead to change in thinking from the current model based on the economy as the main component.

Sustainability needs a nested model that recognizes economic activity within the broader needs of society and contained within the capacity of the natural ecosystem to accommodate that activity in this generation, without compromising the opportunities and choices of the next generation.

There will, of course, be development and this will be encouraged. However, in whatever region that development might occur, there will also be an Aboriginal history; a unique set of fauna and flora; a series of landscapes, with their associated hydrological systems; and a social fabric. This mix of attributes defines the "sense of place" for that region, and it is important that any development fits within that "sense of place".

Sustainability should bring together economic, social and environmental values; and it should be considered at the local as well as regional scale. To move towards sustainability there has to be an acceptance of the need for a partnership between government, industry and the community. To this end, Government should lead by example and take greater responsibility in incorporating the principles of sustainability in all of its operations.

As these considerations on sustainability take place, the EPA will endeavor to continue to be a major player and independent advocate to provide advice to the Government concerning the protection of the environment. The operational framework that the EPA uses, while effective in its own right, functions best when environmental vision is articulated, providing environmental goals for Western Australian society and the EPA. Guided by this vision sit environmental values, objectives and targets, which the EPA develop in consultation with major stakeholders and the community.

As part of the establishment of environmental values and environmental quality objectives, the EPA is developing a series of State-wide Environmental Protection Policies (EPP) covering air quality, groundwater, marine water quality, coastal zone and has foreshadowed the possibility of a State-wide rivers, estuaries and catchments EPP.

To support the State Sustainability Strategy, Western Australia needs a comprehensive and transparent natural resource management (NRM) environmental evaluation process that will objectively measure whether natural resources are being managed on a sustainable basis. Although environmental performance in Western Australia is already included in many agencies reporting requirements, it was recognized in the last State of the Environment Report that there is a need for all relevant State Government agencies to develop an Environmental Monitoring and Reporting Program for Western Australia, which more explicitly links NRM performance, to environmental policy development and objective setting. Such a framework would support future State of the Environment Reports, and would be compatible with the various tiers of reporting processes that have developed, that is local, catchment, state and national.

The EPA has an important role to play, in consultation with the NRM agencies, in setting overarching environmental values, objectives and targets that reflect the principles of sustainability, and which agencies should take into account in giving attention to their environmental responsibilities. The EPA also has a role at the evaluation level in reviewing environmental performance against objectives and targets so as to evaluate the performance of natural resource management.

The results of the evaluation are considered by the EPA so that actions of operators and their management procedures can be adjusted to improve performance, in an adaptive management feedback loop. In this framework, environmental objectives set in association with the EPA can also be refined if necessary. The State of the Environment Report provides a means to review the effectiveness of this approach, as environmental outcomes are measured on a regular basis at a whole of state level.

In undertaking its role of evaluating environmental management performance, the EPA will work closely with the agencies and take into account the arrangements already in place and to agree upon the most appropriate method to undertake this task in an independent and transparent manner. Similarly, the EPA looks forward to working with your office to establish agreed roles in the developing State Sustainability Strategy.

Yours sincerely

Bernard Bowen
CHAIRMAN

30 April 2002