

# **Future Directions International**

**submission on**

## **Focus on the future: the Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy: consultation draft.**

We congratulate the Government on this initiative and on the draft consultation document. Of particular merit is the strategic nature of the document and the emphasis on sustainability assessment as an integrative, whole of government approach to decision making. We commend the focus on promoting the need to look forward with a vision of simultaneously improving all three aspects of the triple bottom line, rather than more commonly applied techniques that aim only to assess and reduce adverse impacts. In our brief submission we draw attention to:

- the need for Government to invest in the research necessary to develop methods for Sustainability Assessment,
- the need to consider the wider strategic implications of the Hydrogen Economy,
- the considerable additional responsibility being placed on local government in the Draft Strategy, and
- the long-term nature of sustainability and the need for widespread support.

In the context of the Draft Strategy we make some observations on the recent changes to policy on logging in old growth forests.

### **The need to develop methods for Sustainability Assessment**

Perhaps the key challenge for the implementation of the State Sustainability Strategy is the development of appropriate sustainability assessment methods that underpin much of the strategy. There are no immediately applicable techniques available for undertaking Sustainability Assessment. Other countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada are significantly further down the road to developing the required methods and have an existing culture of applying related techniques such as Strategic Environmental Assessment and Triple Bottom Line Accounting. In comparison, Western Australia has no real experience in the widespread adoption of these techniques and has much to learn. The aspiration, stated in the Draft Strategy, to lead is admirable and we agree that there is likely to be a significant global market. However, the government must invest in the research necessary to develop appropriate

methodologies and must ensure that the methods are well understood by those implementing them and have widespread support amongst all stakeholders.

There is considerable merit in WA developing an appropriate methodology because of its unique diversity of regional environments. The Draft Strategy proposes that an Industry-Government Sustainability Assessment Working Group be established to develop the processes of sustainability assessment. It should be noted that considerable expertise in strategic research and analysis exists within the state and should be included in the Working Group. In addition to the universities and CSIRO, independent research institutes such as Future Directions International (FDI) have expertise that can contribute to the development of appropriate methods. FDI, for example, has experience in the use of techniques such as effects-based analysis.

Effects-based analysis provides a formal systems approach for the comparison of policy or project options. It is aimed at strategic decision-making and is qualitative in some respects, although firmly objective. It is most widely used in military planning but is finding its way into civilian policy development, mainly in the United States. FDI would welcome the opportunity to demonstrate the principles of the technique and to undertake a project to demonstrate its applicability to sustainability issues.

### **Strategic assessment of the impacts of transformation to the Hydrogen Economy**

The Draft Strategy addresses the issue of Western Australia's oil vulnerability and proposes the examination of issues related to the Hydrogen Economy. We support this proposal which comes at a time when the United States Government has announced a considerable investment in research and development of hydrogen technologies. The potential transformation to the Hydrogen Economy has widespread implications for the future of Western Australia and the proposed Taskforce on the Hydrogen Economy should be encouraged to engage specialists able to undertake strategic research and analysis of these wider implications. Any investigation should not restrict itself to an examination of only technological and economic issues.

### **Local Government needs substantial support**

The Draft Strategy places considerable emphasis on the role of local government. Although this offers opportunities for community engagement, local government is less likely to have necessary resources and expertise to immediately fulfil the role proposed in the Draft Strategy. If Local Government is to grow to fulfil that role it will need considerable support. Without well-established techniques or access to experienced staff there is danger of a fragmented approach to sustainability with different interpretations or techniques being applied in different local government jurisdictions with consequent frustration by industry and the community.

It is noted that Local Government boundaries may not coincide with natural landscape boundaries that are often important in environmental elements of sustainability.

### **Sustainability must be a long-term strategy**

Sustainability is a long-term issue and this must be a long-term strategy. The development of the necessary techniques for sustainability assessment, the adoption of sustainability assessment government agencies and then the wider community by will take a considerable time and the benefits will not all be apparent for an even longer period.

This is not a reason to delay but emphasises the importance of engaging the community in the adoption of the strategy. The preparation of this Draft Strategy has included extensive public consultation and is commendable in that regard. Before the strategy is implemented, however, there needs to be widespread support from industry, community, local government and both sides of politics. The implementation of this strategy will take longer than any term of government and significant changes or even reversals in policy would be likely to lead to a loss of confidence in the process by government agencies, industry and the wider community. It may be necessary to apply newly developed methods of sustainability assessment to limited areas of government in the form of pilot trials to demonstrate their effectiveness before insisting on their wholesale adoption.

### **Old Growth Forests**

The example of the forest industry is a challenging one. There is no evidence of immediate social and economic benefits flowing from the decision to end old-growth logging. Although adjustment programs have been put in place in an effort to aid the structural changes to the timber industry caused by the end to old growth logging, the sudden change in policy has been both socially and economically disruptive in the south-west region.

The State Sustainability Strategy stresses the importance of incorporating the social dimension into sustainability. While not debating the long-term environmental merits of the policy and acknowledging that the previous policy could not be described as sustainable, the example of the old growth forest policy emphasises the need for community involvement in and ownership of long-term strategic planning. The old growth forest issue has divided the regional community and illustrates how sudden shifts in policy can be against the short-term sustainability of a region. Sustainability Assessment of policy must include an assessment of the implementation of policy, not just the long-term outcomes of policy. How might the Old Growth Forest policy have been developed and implemented if the regional community had articulated a 'sense of place' document telling their own story of their region and their aspirations for a more sustainable future?