7 March 2003

Professor Peter Newman
Director, Sustainability Policy Unit
Department of the Premier and Cabinet
15th Floor, 197 St George's Tce
Perth WA 6000

Submission on the Consultation Draft of the Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy

Dear Professor Newman,

On behalf of the State Mitigation Committee's Senior Officers Working Group: Land Use Planning in Relation to Natural Hazard Mitigation, please find enclosed the Group's submission on the draft of the Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy.

Please direct any enquires on the submission to:

James Betterworth
FESA Manager Mitigation
Emergency Management Services
FESA House 480 Hay Street Perth

Yours sincerely

Mike Allen
CHAIR
DEPARTMENT FOR PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

State Mitigation committee – Senior Officers Working Group: Land Use Planning in Relation to Natural Hazard Mitigation.

Submission on the Consultation Draft of the Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy

Background

Natural hazard impacts

Significant natural hazards that can impact Australian communities include folds, cyclones, storm surge, severe winds, bush fires, earthquakes, landslides and tsunamis. These can threaten lives, damage buildings, and disrupt essential services.

Natural hazards are estimated to cost an annual average of $1.25 billion nationally. The costs of individual hazards can be much greater (e.g., 1989 Newcastle earthquake).

The importance of mitigation

It is now widely accepted that it simply costs too much to address the effects of emergencies only after they happen. The traditional approach of emergency response and restoration of communities must therefore be supported by emergency mitigation. As part of a suite of initiatives for achieving community sustainability, governments can moderate natural hazard impacts by viewing by being aware of potential risks and vulnerable areas and by instigating mitigating actions, including improved land use planning, land management practices and building codes.

Promoting a risk management approach for safer sustainable communities, mitigation is defined as any sustained action taken to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to life and property from a hazard event. It aims to achieve this in ways that are cost-effective, environmentally sound and that minimise community disruption. It is most effective when based on an inclusive, comprehensive, long-term planning process.

The result is not just a safer community but one that is more supportive and sustainable.

The State Mitigation Committee

To these ends, the State Mitigation Committee (SMC) was established by State Cabinet in 2001. The SMC will provide a coordinated whole-of-government approach to natural hazard mitigation, ensure access to appropriate (e.g., Commonwealth) funding and implement mitigation strategies statewide. A key aim is to ensure that hazards are adequately considered when making decisions about land use and development, including property, business, infrastructure and community development.

More broadly, the vision for safer, sustainable communities illustrates a society that is fully aware of natural hazards and routinely takes action to reduce associated risks and costs. Certainly in high risk areas, sustainable development will only be possible to the extent that planning decisions address the destructive potential of hazards. Consequently, hazard mitigation and management need to be incorporated as components of a workable sustainability strategy.

Comments on the Draft Strategy

This submission deals primarily with matters of omission in the State Sustainability Strategy consultation draft. The document contains virtually no reference to safety/natural hazard/mitigation issues and the need to foster community capacity to deal with such issues. As maintained this important area needs to be considered as part a suite of sustainability actions.

Statements of Planing Policy

The consultation draft outlines a classification systems for Statements of Planning Policy (page 56). As weighty documents in the overall planning system, an SPP for natural hazard mitigation would carry significant influence. It would likely form a supplementary policy under the Sector Policy, " Sustainable Settlements and Community".

Such a document would refer to key information products, for example, the "Planning for Bushfire Protection" land development planning tool and the WA Floodplain Management Strategy.

Sustainability in Indigenous communities

It also held that, in order to attain comprehensive healthy and safe environments in Indigenous communities, the "Planning for Aboriginal Communities" SPP needs to take into account community proneness to natural hazards including flooding.

In more detail, a level of endemic vulnerability typically within remote communities across the State, contributed by isolation factors such as low populations level and density, limited services and facilities, and socio-economic disadvantage. Communities are generally under-prepared for natural hazard events through a lack of resources, sheer distance from appropriate agencies, and inadequate planning. These problems are exacerbated by a harsh and variable climate.

The potential impact on the sustainability of remote Indigenous communities is particularly high given the following influences.

- Non-mainstream, ad-hoc development and inappropriate siting of communities;
- Substandard or inappropriate infrastructure, as well as lack of access to and maintenance of infrastructure;

- Distance and access to and from major service centres and local government;
- Ad-hoc pre-emergency planning and risk assessments and low community awareness of risks and responsibilities.

In such communities, little consideration has been given to long-term social, cultural and economic sustainability.

In all communities, it will be important to convey that the money spent today on mitigation can substantially reduce impacts and the demand for even more money after future emergencies (thus heightening economic and social sustainability). How well communities can integrate growth and development with mitigation objectives will influence the extent to which they have a sustainable future. In this regard, state and local governments have a variety of techniques available to influence the location, type, design, quality and timing of development.

As a specific example, given waste and grey water are important public health issues, to satisfy natural mitigation concern, land use planning therefore needs to consider the most appropriate placements for services including water systems and rubbish tips. As such, a key output of the State Mitigation process will be the provision of a model/framework identifying where to best place infrastructure to mitigate hazards.

Maintaining biodiversity (Contributing to global sustainability)

Conserving WA biodiversity is a key component of biological diversity. Fire is a major intrusion into the natural environment. Fire frequency has a significant impact on the floral biodiversity of an area. A loss of floral biodiversity directly affects the fauna, both at the macro and micro levels. It is acknowledged that flora normally only makes up 5% of the diversity of an area, but its influence is significantly more important as it makes up the basis of many of the ecosystems.

FESA through its direct activities in the gazetted Fire Districts and in the Unallocated Crown Land and through the volunteer brigades, both Bush Fire and Rescue, in the remainder of the State are actively pursing fire management strategies to ensure that biodiversity is not diminished. Whilst the south west of WA is very well researched through the activities of CALM and others, and the north of the State the Tropical Savannas Management CRC the rest of the WA falls into a fire management research void. The completed comprehensive biological surveys of the Nullarbor, eastern Goldfields, south Carnarvon Basin and the Great Sandy Desert and the parts of the Little sandy Desert and the Kimberley's surveyed now need to be provided to both the natural and built environment.

Agencies of the State and Commonwealth Governments need to be cognisant that managing the Unallocated Crown Land, from a fire

perspective, is the responsibility of FESA and accordingly needs to be represented on any future review as proposed on page 129 dot point 3.53.

To improve the protection of the environment and maintain biodiversity there needs to be greater access to research funding that is targeted to obtaining information on fire and its impact on biodiversity for all the bioregions in WA. FESA has sought research in WA through the Bush Fire CRC and is actively seeking partners to obtain Commonwealth funding. In virtually all cases there is a requirement for Agency seed funding that will be matched either in part or fully by the Commonwealth. Without that seed funding there is no opportunity to fill knowledge gap.

Implementation

It is also agreed that the concept of sustainability will be difficult to implement. The strategy may benefit from including a section, which defines significant factors that influence implementation. For example, terms such as “integrated solutions” are frequently used but often without substance. Clearly, there is a difference between a dives group of experts giving best-bet opinions and genuinely integrating the physical, biological, economic, social and institutional systems that underpin sustainability.

More specific attention on the institutional, procedural and communicative aspects of sustainability appears warranted. In a particular, the following need to be addressed:

- Harnessing non-expert/indigenous knowledge and including this input decision making;
- Portraying and communicating sustainability concepts in easily understood terms;
- Ensuring Western Australians can assume practical roles at local community levels.