



17th Meeting of EPHC

Communiqué

7 November 2008

Ministers firm up frameworks to tackle key environmental challenges

At the 17th meeting of the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) in Adelaide, Australian environment ministers agreed to the development of a national waste policy to provide a coherent, efficient and environmentally responsible approach to waste management in Australia.

To help inform the development of this national waste policy, the Council also agreed to the compilation of a comprehensive report on waste.

The national waste policy proposal was one of several initiatives embraced by the Council to address key environmental challenges relating to climate change, waste management and chemicals in a national context.

Ministers were pleased to release the draft Environmental Guidelines for Carbon Dioxide Capture and Geological Storage for public comment. These guidelines, developed in cooperation with the Ministerial Council on Mineral and Petroleum Resources, will be key in assisting Australia reducing its carbon footprint.

In addition to this report, EPHC agreed to work cooperatively with the Local Government and Planning Ministers Council to develop a set of national guidelines for wind farm development. The guidelines will address community concerns about wind farm development such as turbine noise and impacts on landscapes and threatened species, and applies greater national consistency in the way they are examined.

Ministers reinforced their commitment to reduce the environmental impacts of Australia's waste streams. They were encouraged by the progress made by the National Packaging Covenant and the mobile phone industry in reducing the amount of waste going to landfill. Today Ministers recognised the potential to pursue a national approach which builds on the voluntary efforts of supermarkets and the actions of various jurisdictions to reduce plastic bag use. Ministers also reiterated their intention to push ahead with the important background work required before a final decision can be made on a product stewardship approach for products such as computers and televisions.

HERITAGE

World Heritage Governance Review

Ministers agreed to the recommendations made by the World Heritage Governance Review which included membership and terms of reference for the newly formed Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee and World Heritage funding and management principles. The principles are to be incorporated into the roles and responsibilities established under an intergovernmental agreement on the management of Australia's World Heritage properties which is scheduled to be completed by early 2010.

Geoparks

Ministers voiced concern with the announcement by UNESCO to establish the Kanawinka Geopark without the formal endorsement of the Australian Government. As the management and other implications of Geopark listings are potentially significant, such actions require careful prior consideration by all jurisdictions. Ministers requested officials to provide further advice on the implications of Geoparks to enable a national position to be developed.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Carbon Capture and Storage Guidelines

Ministers were pleased to release the draft Environmental Guidelines for Carbon Dioxide Capture and Geological Storage for public comment. These guidelines, developed in cooperation with the Ministerial Council on Mineral and Petroleum Resources, will be a key document to allow for a consistent national approach to the environmental assessment of carbon capture and storage proposals.

Report on Impediments to Wind Energy Development

Wind energy has the potential to deliver a significant proportion of Australia's future electricity needs and contribute to national greenhouse gas abatement objectives. Building community acceptance of this technology is vital to the continued development of renewable energy in Australia. Council agreed to develop a set of National Wind Farm Development Guidelines in collaboration with the Local Government and Planning Ministers Council to deliver a higher degree of consistency and transparency in the planning, assessment, approval and environmental monitoring of wind farms.

Methane Emissions from Landfills

Ministers considered a range of options for the improved management of landfill gas emissions. Ministers, recognising the importance of ensuring that any activities in relation to this issue would need to be complementary to the Australian Government's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, agreed to reconsider the options available, following the release of the White Paper on the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.

WASTE MANAGEMENT

National Waste Policy

Council supported the development of a national waste policy and the compilation of a comprehensive report on waste. A national waste policy will provide much-needed clarity on what is appropriately dealt with at which level. It also affords a timely opportunity to revisit waste policy in the context of broader government policies on climate change and sustainability.

Product Stewardship

Council resolved to support several initiatives to improve the management of priority waste issues, including product stewardship policy, at the national level. The review of the National Waste Framework for determining if a waste issue is a priority for concerted national action is seen as a key component and Ministers were pleased to agree to the Review's Terms of Reference. Ministers also agreed to develop a Product Stewardship Framework to facilitate decisions about when product stewardship is likely to be appropriate, and if so, the elements required for an effective and efficient model.

Ministers acknowledged the significant contribution to product stewardship policy by Product Stewardship Australia, the Australian Information Industry Association the Australian Tyre Industry Council and others, and committed to closely engaging with these groups to develop the Product Stewardship Framework. The wastes assessed against the waste filer criteria were electrical products, hazardous organochlorine wastes, tyres, cigarette butt litter, plastic bags, shredder floc, end of life vehicles, dry cleaning residues, nickel cadmium batteries, unwanted agricultural and veterinary chemicals and containers, unwanted agricultural plastics and bait bags.

Computer and Television Product Stewardship

Ministers released a Statement on end of life televisions and computers. The Statement recognises the high level of concern in some parts of the community regarding the disposal of end of life televisions and computers, and acknowledges the extensive work by the television and computer industries to develop product stewardship schemes. Ministers reiterated their determination to achieve the best outcome for the community by accelerating the important remaining work to identify the best options to manage E-waste nationally.

Plastic Bags

Council welcomed activities aimed at reducing the impacts of plastic bags on the environment. These included the results of the Victorian trial in which retailers voluntarily applied a charge of 10c to all lightweight plastic carry bags. It was also noted that South Australia has legislated to ban plastic bags.

Council continues to be concerned about the environmental impact of plastic bag usage in Australia. Council continues to endorse the use of alternatives to plastic bags, such as reusable bags. Degradable and biodegradable bags can make an important contribution to mitigating the impact of littered plastic bags. Council has endorsed expenditure to underpin Australian standards development for degradable and biodegradable plastics. The development of a full suite of standards for degradable and biodegradable plastics will protect the environment and enable consumers and businesses to be confident that use of biodegradable and degradable plastic bags that meet the standard will achieve long-term environmental benefits.

Ministers noted that reducing the number of plastic bags used requires Government, industry and the community to all do their part. Today Ministers recognised the potential to pursue a national approach which builds on the voluntary efforts of supermarkets and the actions of various jurisdictions to reduce plastic bag use.

Council noted that, based on the outcomes of Victoria's trial in partnership with supermarkets and the Australian National Retailers Association of a 10 cent charge on plastic bags, Victoria, Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Northern Territory will develop a proposal to be considered at the next meeting of Council.

National Packaging Covenant

Council noted the results of the National Packaging Covenant Mid Term Review, including progress towards the packaging recycling target of 65 per cent by 2010 – an increase from 40 per cent in 2003 to 56 per cent in 2007. Ministers agreed that the findings of the review provided a firm basis for discussion about extending the Covenant arrangements beyond its expiry in June 2010. Council requested the National Packaging Covenant Council, in consultation with EPH Standing Committee, to prepare a framework for an extended Covenant beyond June 2010, as well as other options for managing the environmental impacts of packaging, for its consideration at the next EPHC meeting. These options may involve the use of complementary economic (or other) instruments.

Litter Management in Australia

Council considered a report on Litter Management in Australia which looked at the wide range of activity being undertaken by the community and governments at all levels to reduce litter. Despite a growth in overall waste volumes driven by strong economic growth, an assessment of the National Litter Index since 2005–06 suggests that litter volumes may have been decoupled from waste generation, in that they are stable or in decline. While it is important to continue to work to reduce littering behaviour, the report demonstrates the value of the concerted efforts by a wide range of people and organisations and the need to work within current frameworks to ensure this progress continues.

Management of Australia's Waste Streams

Council welcomed the release in September 2008 of the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts report into the Management of Australia's Waste Streams. Council agreed to consider the Senate Committee's recommendations as it further develops its initiatives on waste.

Mobile Phone Product Stewardship

Council welcomed the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association Statement of Commitment and acknowledged the work by the Association to improve mobile phone recovery to date and their commitment to achieve ambitious performance targets over the next five years. Ministers also welcomed the Association's commitment to greater transparency, particularly noting the Association's commitment to publish annual public reports on the performance of the MobileMuster scheme in achieving the targets.

AIR QUALITY

National Approach to Reducing Woodheater Emissions

Council considered a scoping paper that provided a detailed assessment of the options for a national approach to the management of woodheater emissions. Emissions from woodheaters are a significant source of air pollution, and thus health impacts, in many cities and towns throughout Australia. Council agreed to develop a Regulatory Impact Statement to inform a future decision on the preferred management approach.

Managing Emissions from Garden Equipment and Outboard Engines

Council considered a paper that presented the case for national action on reducing emissions from garden equipment and outboard engines. Emissions from garden equipment is a contributor to smog in Australia's urban centres and also impact on ambient particle levels. A cost benefit analysis determined that setting national emission standards for these engines will lead to around \$3.4 billion in saved health costs by 2020. Setting such standards will also mean that Australia is no longer a dumping ground for polluting technology. Council agreed to develop a Regulatory Impact Statement to inform a future decision on how best to establish national standards.

POLICY TOOLS

National Pollutant Inventory (NPI) NEPM

Council agreed to remove the greenhouse gas emissions reporting requirements currently in the NPI NEPM, which are not now required, following enactment of the National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Act 2007 (Commonwealth). Removing these reporting requirements in the NPI NEPM will decrease any confusion faced by industry in reporting to the NPI and by other stakeholders interpreting the requirements of the NPI NEPM.

Noise Labelling Scheme for Portable and Stationary Appliances

Council agreed that a working party would investigate a range of portable and stationary appliances that impact on residential amenity for possible inclusion within a national noise labelling scheme and whether maximum noise limits should be set for portable articles, like leaf blowers.

CHEMICALS

National Chemicals Environmental Management (NChEM)

The National Chemicals (NChEM) Working Group was established in 2003 to develop a framework for assessing and managing the risk to the environment posed by chemicals, and to improve consistency in how chemicals are managed across Australian jurisdictions. After considerable stakeholder consultation a national framework was endorsed by Council in 2007. One year on and the first progress report by the NChEM Working Group is now ready for release. The report highlights the considerable progress made within the last year, including improving the processes in place to gather, use and access information about chemicals. Council agreed to release this first progress report.

Productivity Commission Report into Chemicals and Plastics Regulation

Council will forward to COAG an implementation plan in response to recommendations of the Productivity Commission Chemicals and Plastics Regulation Research Report. The NChEM Working Group has been tasked by Council with delivering the implementation plan once it is agreed by COAG.

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.

For enquiries please contact:

Dr Bruce Kennedy

NEPC Service Corporation

Phone: 08 8419 1200

www.ephc.gov.au