

Senate Inquiry on the impacts on health of air quality in Australia

Opening Statement by the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

Thank for the opportunity to speak with the Committee today.

The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities develops and implements national policy, programs and legislation to protect and conserve Australia's environment, water, heritage and communities. The department's role with respect to air quality is captured in the context of the departmental outcome that aims to achieve improved sustainability of Australia's population, communities and environment, as well as the reduction and regulation of waste, pollutants and hazardous substances.

Assessing the state of Australia's air quality largely focuses on ambient air. Air quality is monitored by tracking concentrations of selected pollutants in the atmosphere. Each pollutant has specific effects on human health, mostly relating to the respiratory and cardiovascular systems. In general, air quality has remained consistently very good over the past two decades in most parts of Australia. However, in some areas air quality has been variable.

The *Sustainable Australia Report 2013*, released this month, reflects other regular Australian reporting¹ that the air quality rating for major pollutants that affect human health is 'good' or 'very good' in most regions. Australia's good air quality is also supported by international reports such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's *Environmental Performance Review: Australia* in 2007 which concluded that air quality in Australia is good overall with some urban areas and local hotspots of concern. Improvements in air quality over the past 20 years are largely due to the progressive tightening of national vehicle emission and fuel quality standards, and the management of industrial, commercial and domestic sources of air pollution.

¹ *Australia State of the Environment 2011* report and the *State of the Air in Australia 1999–2008*

Despite the generally good quality of urban air in Australia, the impact of poor urban air quality on human health is still a matter of concern. For example particles and ozone, the ambient air levels of which have not decreased over the past ten years, are known to impact on cardiovascular and respiratory health.

State, territory and local governments have direct responsibility for the management of air quality in their jurisdictions. State authorities conduct air quality monitoring; regulate industrial emissions through licensing and compliance, and have procedures in place to respond to concerns relating to ambient air pollution.

The Australian Government plays a role in air quality management where there are benefits in a national approach, including through legislative action on reducing emissions from priority emissions sources. Air quality is assessed against the national ambient air quality standards set for pollutants in the National Environment Protection Measure (or NEPM) for Ambient Air Quality (the Air NEPM).

The National Environment Protection Council (NEPC), established under the *National Environment Protection Council Act 1994 (Cth)* and mirror legislation in other jurisdictions, have responsibility for NEPMs. The NEPC is now part of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Standing Council on Environment and Water (the Council). The Council is chaired by the Australian Government Environment Minister and comprises ministers responsible for environment and water from the Commonwealth, all states and territories and New Zealand.

I mention this because the National Environment Protection Council is the statutory body with law making powers to make NEPMs and to assess and report on their implementation and effectiveness in participating jurisdictions. The Australian Government cannot establish, vary or revoke a NEPM unilaterally. The National Environment Protection Council can only make changes to a NEPM if the variation is supported by a unanimous resolution of all of the members. The creation, variation and revocation of NEPMs must be done in accordance with the requirement of the *National Environment Protection Council Act 1994*. The COAG Regulation Impact Statement process must also be adhered to, which includes an extensive consultation process.

In 2011, COAG identified air quality as a Priority Issue of National Significance and agreed that the Council would develop a National Plan for Clean Air to improve air quality, and community health and well being. The Plan is to be delivered to COAG by the end of 2014.

The National Plan for Clean Air will provide a framework for identifying cost effective actions and implementation arrangements to reduce air pollution. In particular, the Plan will respond to the recommendations from the review of the Air NEPM, which was released on 16 September 2011. The Council's public statement on the development of the National Plan for Clean Air can be viewed on their website.

The development of the National Plan for Clean Air is taking a staged and prioritised approach, and the priority for the first stage is on particle pollution (or particles). I note that this priority is also the focus of this Senate Inquiry. This priority recognises that current population exposure to particles needs to be addressed and that significant health benefits can be achieved. New air quality standards, including for particles, and an exposure reduction framework will be features of the National Plan for Clean Air.

The first stage of the development of the Plan includes a health risk assessment of four common pollutants, including particles; the development of an exposure reduction framework for particles; the development of options for actions to reduce particle pollution, and an economic analysis of a range of potential particle standards. Consultancies on the health risk assessment, the exposure reduction framework and the cost benefit analysis are nearing completion – the outcomes of which will provide guidance on the continuing development of the Plan.

Also, as part of the development of the National plan for Clean Air, work on emission projects is underway. This work includes non-road spark ignition engines and equipment (such as used in garden equipment and recreational marine vessels); non-road diesel engines; and wood heaters. Particulate emissions from wood heaters, for example, are a significant contributor to ambient levels of particle pollution in a number of jurisdictions in Australia.

On 11 April 2013 the Council agreed to the release of a Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement on *Reducing emissions from wood heaters* for a 12-week public consultation. This Consultation Regulation Impact Statement explores options for a national policy and/or regulatory framework for reducing emissions from wood heaters and is an important element of the work program in the development of a National Plan for Clean Air. Submissions on the Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement close on 15 July 2013.

I would like to conclude my opening statement with some brief commentary on the National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality) Measure (the Air NEPM).

The Air NEPM provides national ambient air quality standards and goals for six air pollutants (known as criteria air pollutants). The Air NEPM also sets an advisory reporting standard and goal for particles as PM_{2.5}. Note that the standards are not emission standards for products in the way that motor vehicle emission standards are.

Each jurisdiction must submit a report on its compliance with the Ambient Air Quality NEPM to the Council by the following 30 June of each calendar year. This report includes an evaluation of their own performance against standards and goals. These reports are publicly available and are published on the Council's website. Sanctions for non-compliance do not feature in the Air NEPM. As I mentioned before, states and territories have the primary responsibility for implementing measures to ensure ambient air quality standards are met.

The current Air NEPM includes a methodology for determining the location and number of monitoring stations within a given region. The methodology includes a lower population limit of 25 000 people below which no monitoring is required. However it also includes scope for additional performance monitoring stations which may be needed where pollutant levels are influenced by local characteristics such as topography, weather or emission sources.

I mentioned previously that the recommendations of the review of the Air NEPM will be progressed through the development of the National Plan for Clean Air. The review of the Air NEPM made 23 recommendations. Overall these recommendations support a shift in the focus of the NEPM to an integrated, risk-based approach, with improvements in exposure assessment and reduction and monitoring approaches. The recommendations include

- revising standards for all criteria air pollutants to take into account new evidence around the health effects of air pollution
- establishing compliance standards for PM_{2.5}
- introducing an exposure reduction framework and targets for priority pollutants
- redesigning monitoring networks to represent population exposure on a pollutant-by-pollutant basis
- removing the 25 000 population threshold and formula to enable monitoring on potential population risk rather than population size.

As I explained earlier, the Australian Government cannot establish, vary or revoke a NEPM unilaterally. Only the National Environment Protection Council can authorise changes to be made to a NEPM.

In conclusion, air quality has been identified as one of five environmental priorities for the Council of Australian Governments, and a National Plan for Clean Air is underway. The Plan will bring together Commonwealth, state and territory action to reduce the risk of health impacts from air pollution. In particular, the Plan will respond to the recommendations from the review of the Air NEPM. Many of these recommendations have been discussed (both directly and indirectly) in the submissions and in evidence provided at the hearings for this Senate Inquiry. The Australian Government will continue to work with states and territories to deliver the National Plan for Clean Air to COAG by the end of 2014.

Thank you.