

Government Response to the House of Representatives Standing

Committee on Environment and Heritage Report:

Review of the Department of the Environment's annual report for 1997-98

April 2000

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage (the Committee) Report: *Review of the Department of the Environment's annual report for 1997-98* (the Review), was tabled in the House of Representatives on Monday 21 June 1999. The Review examines several of the activities of the Department of the Environment and Heritage (DoEH) as outlined in the 1997-98 annual report. The Review makes two recommendations and draws a number of other conclusions.

DoEH notes that in the introduction the Committee identified its focus as being on Environment Australia (EA) and its programs. The Committee defined EA as the group responsible for environment policy and programs delivered by the Australian and World Heritage Group, Biodiversity Group, Science Group, Environmental Protection Group and Marine Group. The Portfolio Strategies Group is also part of EA.

The Committee should also note that there has been further refinement of the structure of the DoEH since 1997 including the consolidation of the responsibilities of Marine Group. The most recent of these is the transfer of activities relating to the protection of marine species, the remaining marine protected area functions, and marine and estuarine water quality functions to Marine Group.

There are many bodies with interests in water resources, and much of the work by DoEH must be done in conjunction with the States, which have constitutional power, and Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Australia (AFFA), which has responsibility under the Government's Administrative Orders for water resources. The joint nature of this work, and of many of the jointly administered programs mentioned in this report, such as the Natural Heritage Trust, and the *National Water Quality Management Strategy* (NWQMS) should also be noted by the Committee.

The following addresses the recommendations put forward by the Committee.

Recommendation 1

"The Committee recommends that the Department of the Environment and Heritage, in conjunction with other relevant departments and agencies, undertake a review of programs addressing inland rivers and waterways. The review should consider:

- **rationalisation of current rivers and waterways programs into a single river health strategy, incorporating and strengthening the National Water Quality Management Strategy;**
- **a proposal for developing mandatory national water quality standards; and**
- **development of a national database on water quality, incorporating data collected by the National Land and Water Resources Audit."**

Response

DoEH notes that several of the issues proposed for the review are being, or have been addressed since the Annual Report was tabled. The Government is conscious of the need to regularly review, assess and improve the delivery of its water programs. In order to strengthen existing programs, such as the *National Water Quality Management Strategy* (NWQMS), emphasis and priority is being given to completing the outstanding Guidelines and applying the NWQMS policies, principles and guidelines to all Commonwealth-funded river management projects.

Related Review Activity

Water Functions Review Process

DoEH is in the process of reviewing its existing water functions. The aim of the review process is to better coordinate water-related program and policy areas across the portfolio and to identify potential economies of scale, whilst delivering on the portfolio's responsibilities. The water functions review process will also develop strategies to further strengthen linkages with other relevant Commonwealth agencies.

The review process is linked to wider activities across the portfolio aimed at positioning DoEH to meet its new responsibilities under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

As part of this review process, a number of responsibilities formerly residing with the Environment Protection Group's 'Water Quality Section' have been transferred to the Marine Group. To gain a better focus on the Government's commitments to marine and estuarine water quality standards and programs, the marine and estuarine water quality functions previously undertaken within the Environment Protection Group have been transferred to the Marine Group and consolidated with the NHT's Coasts and Clean Seas initiative.

Mid-term Review of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT)

As part of the NHT evaluation process a number of separate reviews are being undertaken. Of relevance to DoEH's freshwater programs are two overarching reviews (the NHT Administrative Arrangements review and the Inland Waterways review) as well as the following program-specific reviews:

- National Wetlands Program;
- Waterwatch;
- National River Health;
- Riverworks Tasmania.

In addition, evaluations are also being undertaken for the following Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Australia water-related programs:

- Murray Darling Basin 2001;
- National Rivercare Program.

Rationalisation of current rivers and waterways programs into a single river health strategy, incorporating and strengthening the National Water Quality Management Strategy

Without seeking to pre-empt the findings of the NHT evaluation process, the Government notes the discrete nature of the various freshwater programs within DoEH. These are outlined below.

- *The National Wetlands Program* provides for the listing of new wetlands under the Ramsar Convention, and for the completion of management plans for all of Australia's existing 53 listed wetlands. The Program is also designed to facilitate implementation of the Commonwealth Wetlands Policy, including an inventory of wetlands on Commonwealth land and waters.
- *Waterwatch Australia* is a national program that supports the monitoring of waterways by schools and community groups, aiming to promote community action to address water quality and aquatic biodiversity issues.

- *The National River Health Program* is a further strategy to support the Commonwealth's efforts to progress implementation of the environmental aspects of the Council of Australian Governments Water Reform Framework.
- *The Living Cities Program* is a new measure, which recognises that Australia's environmental problems are not restricted to regional and rural areas. It includes an Urban Waterways component that will expand the NHT's Waterwatch program within urban areas and establish a national monitoring regime for assessing urban river health. Other components of Urban Waterways include the Commonwealth Stormwater Initiative (Clean Seas Section) and projects to improve urban water quality (Water Quality Protection Section).
- The Committee did not include comment on *Riverworks Tasmania*, which has been effective and efficient partly because of its small scale and regional focus. Riverworks Tasmania, part of which focuses on the Tamar and Derwent Rivers, also addresses problems in urban rivers and waterways, answering the concern of the Committee that the current river programs do not specifically address problems in these areas.

DoEH undertakes a coordinated and multi-faceted approach to the protection of water quality that is affected by factors including land, effluent, pollution and stormwater management practices. DoEH undertakes this in conjunction with the States and AFFA. The diversity of programs related to rivers and waterways reflects the need for a broad-based approach to maintaining and improving water quality. Regular meetings are convened to maximise synergies from the various programs.

The aim of the *National Water Quality Management Strategy* (NWQMS) is to pursue the sustainable use of the nation's water resources by protecting and enhancing water quality while maintaining economic and social development. This is a goal shared by DoEH's various water quality policies and programs. The NWQMS was not designed to be a "*coordinating mechanism for the management of all river and water quality programs*", as was suggested by the Committee on page 10 of the Committee's Report. The High Level Steering Group on Water, however, has undertaken to ensure that DoEH and AFFA work together to complete the NWQMS guidelines as soon as possible.

A proposal for developing national water quality standards

National standards for marine and estuarine waters are soon to be considered through the National Environment Protection Council (NEPC). This would be distinct from the NWQMS process, but would however, build on the NWQMS documents. However, as noted in The Review (p10):

The States have been a little reluctant to agree to go down that path at this stage because they believe that we need to finalise the National Water Quality Management Strategy Guidelines before we develop [national water quality standards].

DoEH and AFFA have expedited finalisation of the national strategy guidelines. The Minister released the *Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality* for public comment in July 1999. It is expected these will be finalised and agreed by jurisdictions by mid 2000. At this time, the NEPC will have the opportunity to reconsider the development of marine and estuarine water quality National Environment Protection Measures (NEPM) standards. The finalised guidelines could be expected to form the basis of any mandatory water quality standards.

DoEH is also undertaking Marine and Estuarine Water Quality scoping activity in order to develop nationally accepted, mandatory marine and estuarine water quality standards. As part of this process, DoEH will work with AFFA and States to complete two National Strategy documents: *Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality*, and the *Australian Guidelines for Water*

Quality Monitoring and Reporting. DoEH will investigate translating the *Water Quality Guidelines* into standards for marine and estuarine water quality protection, through a NEPM. Additionally, DoEH is examining opportunities for enhancing water quality through the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. The outcomes of this work will influence the development of water quality standards for non-marine aquatic environments.

Development of a national database on water quality, incorporating data collected by the National Land and Water Resources Audit

DoEH is actively engaged in the development of a national database on water quality. The Environment Protection Group of DoEH, in partnership with the National Land and Water Resources Audit (NLWRA), is currently revising the *Water Quality Monitoring in Australia* report and database. This database will update and digitally collect metadata on all current water quality monitoring programs in Australia. This report will contain recommendations for improving water quality monitoring. The database is expected to be finalised in March 2000 and available on the Internet in mid-2000.

The database will help provide the basis for developing efficient and effective monitoring systems necessary for water quality management, State of the Environment (SoE) Reporting, national audit reporting and for measuring compliance with standards and guidelines.

The database will also support implementation of the NWQMS. It should for example, help make monitoring more efficient and effective and provide greater access to data. The project would also complement the NWQMS *Water Quality Guidelines* and *Water Quality Monitoring and Reporting Guidelines*.

On completion of the database, a GIS interface will be funded by DoEH and the database placed on the Internet. The resulting database could then be a one-stop-shop for water quality data in Australia using its metadata and the links to data custodians and their databases. This would be an efficient and effective way of accessing water quality and related information, that could be used by agencies, local government, industry, universities and the community sector for numerous purposes including policy development, regulatory functions, reporting, research, and education.

DoEH initiated an important joint project in late 1998 between the National SoE Reporting area, NLWRA, States, and Territories towards a comparable analysis of water quality status, trends and exceedances of water quality guidelines. A consistent trend analysis methodology based upon current approaches, and the criteria for site selection have since been agreed between jurisdictions. A management committee has been established to oversee the project, comprising SoE (DoEH, and States and Territories), NLWRA, and the Murray Darling Basin Commission.

DoEH has also initiated a project to document the incidence of blue-green algal blooms in inland waters; the frequency of, and dominant species responsible for algal blooms in estuaries and coastal waters; contingency plans for algal blooms in inland waters and registers of fish kills.

These inland water quality projects will implement a number of environmental indicators related to water quality, identify sources, collate, analyse, interpret and present data for the 2001 National SoE Report. The data will be made available throughout DoEH, and externally to the NLWRA and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The National Pollutant Inventory will provide data on emissions of pollutants to water. This information may assist in the development of monitoring programs for water quality and possible identification of a need for development of particular water quality standards.

Conclusion

The Committee has highlighted a number of important water management and water quality issues. DoEH acknowledges the significant environmental challenges that are identified here and believes the current coordination and management of government programs is addressing the range of issues identified by the Committee.

DoEH considers its existing reviews, including the NHT review and water functions review, will effectively implement the intent of the Committee's recommendation by ensuring better rationalisation and coordination of its various water programs.

Recommendation 2

"The Committee recommends that the Department of the Environment and Heritage examine the extent to which data collected for other portfolio and agency programs is used in the compilation of the state of the environment report.

The Department should then develop its state of the environment reporting framework around existing data resources as far as possible, to draw upon the whole of government's resources and its expertise across program areas. State of the environment reporting should provide a basis for future decision-making for all environment policies and programs."

Response

The Government supports recommendation 2 with some clarification.

Paragraph one and the second sentence of paragraph two are agreed. The following is a clarification in relation to the first sentence of paragraph two.

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* contains a requirement for the preparation of five-yearly SoE reports, with the next report due in December 2001 (Section 516B).

When identifying potential data sources for SoE reporting and indicators, Commonwealth agencies are the first sources considered. DoEH and other Commonwealth organisations are in fact the major source of data for these indicators, and consequently for the 2001 SoE Report. In effect, the extent to which data collected for other Commonwealth agency programs is used in the compilation of the SoE report has already been assessed, and is constantly being reassessed as new programs commence.

Important Commonwealth data sources for the 2001 SoE Report will be DoEH, the NLWRA, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. An intra-departmental working group has been established to ensure all relevant data collected or held by DoEH is utilised in the 2001 report. A tripartite Memorandum of Understanding with the NLWRA and the Australian Bureau of Statistics is being negotiated. The aim of the Memorandum is to enhance cooperation and consultation in data collection and access between DoEH and these two key agencies. Other Commonwealth organisations such as Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Health, Industry Science and Resources and the CSIRO are also data sources.

Development of the current SoE reporting process commenced in 1992, and is based on an OECD model. The Minister launched the resulting reporting framework in June 1994. Key elements of the reporting framework include oversight of the process by an independent committee of experts appointed by the Minister and the development of indicators for SoE reporting. The aim is to present a scientifically credible picture, at the continental scale, of the state of the Australian environment. The reporting process is evolving in the light of experience and is now a mature and well-accepted system. Existing data is being applied to that framework to the maximum extent practicable, drawing upon the

whole of government's resources and its expertise across program areas. The reporting process also represents an important mechanism to signal those current or emerging issues for which there are no existing data sources.

The National Pollutant Inventory will provide data on emissions to air, land and water, which will assist in analyses for the State of the Environment reports.

Conclusion

The Australian SoE reporting system has been well received internationally and the 1996 SoE Report was the major background document for the OECD's review of Australia's environmental performance. The current reporting cycle for the 2001 SoE Report is aimed at better informing decision-makers. SoE reporting is a tool for decision-makers, not only for environment and natural resource management policies and programs but also for informing other social and economic decisions. It provides a valuable mechanism for ensuring environment objectives are incorporated into all decision making.

The Government recognises the importance of links between SoE reporting and other national reporting processes. For example SoE reporting and the NLWRA are sharing a number of data compilation projects and the legacy of the Audit will provide an important baseline contribution for future SoE reporting on trends.

Summary

DoEH has noted and considered the recommendations put forward by the Committee. Most of the specific recommendations have subsequently been addressed since the production of the annual report.

DoEH is actively engaged in the development of a national database on water quality, and is working towards the development of national water quality guidelines. There are currently a number of reviews of the programs through which inland rivers and waterways programs are being addressed, including the water functions review process, and the NHT mid-term review. DoEH is of the opinion that its existing reviews, including the NHT review and water functions review, will effectively implement the intent of the Committee's recommendation by ensuring better rationalisation and coordination of its various water programs.

DoEH currently works closely with other agencies in the SoE reporting process. This reporting process is an evolving system, and is continually being improved upon, including the extent to which it draws upon the resources of the whole of government.

In conclusion, DoEH considers that it is working towards achieving the Committees recommendations.