

The Post-Election Policy Outlook For The Environment

The re-election of the Howard Government on 9 October has a range of implications for federal environmental policy and for specific environmental issues among the States.

Tasmanian forests

The Liberal election campaign culminated in a commitment to protect more old growth forests in Tasmania from logging. The Howard Government has said that it will add 170,000 hectares to the old growth forest areas currently protected from logging. It will continue to consult with stakeholders within the framework of the 1997 Regional Forest Agreement and funds will be dedicated to finding sustainable, high-yield alternatives to clearfelling. Other focal points of the Tasmanian forest policy were:

- To re-fit sawmills and enhance the skills of mill workers to enable sawmills to produce a wider and more sustainable range of products;
- To encourage wholesalers and retailers to sell wood products from sustainable growth sources in compliance with Australia's international obligations;
- To assist the softwood industry in establishing a plant for the 'environmentally friendly' preservation of pine;
- To phase out the use of copper chrome arsonate by the softwood industry within 2 years, and the use of 1080 poison bait in forestry practices generally by December 2005 or earlier;
- To undertake a study on the impact of chemical residues, and farming and forestry practices generally, on Tasmanian water reserves;
- To purchase, or facilitate the voluntary covenanting of, 2,400 hectares of forest in the Mole Creek area;
- To fund the further development of the Tarkine Bush Walk.

Water

A commitment has been made by the re-elected federal Government to establish an Australian Water Fund. The purposes of the Fund will be to enhance community awareness of water preservation, encourage more efficient use of water at the national level, and improve national water standards. It will finance projects to find alternatives to coastal sewerage outlets, desalinate water for urban use, improve the efficiency of water storage facilities and irrigation systems, and improve building designs to maximise water efficiency. Grants will be generally be made by the Fund on a competitive basis.

At the 'ground level', community organisations will receive funding for specific projects such as cleaning up rivers, making use of stormwater, and encouraging the community to use water efficiently. The 'Water Wise' Community grants are to be made to community organisations or larger, community-based non-governmental organisations on a competitive basis.

To improve water efficiency at the national level, the Howard Government will introduce a scheme for labelling products which use water with an 'efficiency rating'. This scheme would be applied to many everyday household items, such as whitegoods and bathroom sanitaryware. Another initiative will be to formulate National Guidelines on Water Recycling to achieve the safe re-use of greywater and effluent for a wide range of purposes. Similarly, new National Stormwater Use Guidelines will be created to identify appropriate uses for stormwater, and efficient ways of managing it by improving urban design.

A further commitment has been made by the Federal Government to create a national water accounting system, in which data on national water-related resources and usage will be collated and processed. The objective of this will be to encourage a greater understanding of water usage and to identify ways to improve efficiency. Assessments will also be made in relation to strategic groundwater reserves, to form a clearer picture of the reserves that exist and how they are being used.

A National Water Commission will be established to advise on funding applications submitted to the

Australian Water Fund and, more generally, to oversee the water reforms that are to take place. Work carried out by both the Commission and the Fund is intended to complement the National Water Initiative Agreements signed by the Federal and State Governments in June 2004.

Sustainable Energy

The Liberal Government has promised to establish a Low Emissions Technology Fund, and to promote the increased use of low emission energy from renewable sources through the Mandatory Renewable Energy Target.

Funding will be made available to programs which support the renewable energy industry, such as the Renewable Energy Commercialisation Program, the Renewable Energy Showcase Program, the Renewable Energy Equity Fund, the Photovoltaic Rebate Program and the Renewable Remote Power Generation Program.

At a more general level, the Government will promote best practice energy performance and the application of energy efficiency measures in households as well as the industrial sector. Australian Government operations will be required to meet higher standards of energy efficiency, and businesses using a high amount of energy will have to undertake a review of their operating efficiency every 5 years.

The promotion of low emission energy sources and renewable energy is part of an overall strategy on climate change put forward by the Federal Government. However, the Government maintains that it will not ratify the Kyoto Protocol and that Australia already meets the targets standards set out in the Protocol without having to take this step.

Commonwealth Environment Research Facility (CERF)

The Howard Government has indicated that it will fund a 'national world class' environmental research facility, the Commonwealth Environment Research Facility, which would focus on issues ranging from desertification, dryland salinity and bushfires to the Antarctic, greenhouse issues, irrigation, weed management, and biotechnology. Grants will be made on a competitive bidding basis to projects which demonstrate a strong 'public good' focus and outcome in relation to 'quality environmental research proposals'. The Facility is intended to provide funding to projects which would not normally receive financial assistance from other sources.

The Great Barrier Reef and North Queensland Rainforests

As part of the Commonwealth Environment Research Facility, funding is to be allocated to the creation of a new Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility. As the name suggests, the primary purpose of the latter will be to conduct ongoing research on the Great Barrier Reef and tropical rainforest issues.

A review of the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Act* will be undertaken to assess the performance of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and identify any improvements to be made.

Productivity Report on the Impacts of Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Regulations

A report was released by the Australian Government Productivity Commission on 10 August 2004 following an inquiry into the impacts of native vegetation and biodiversity regulations.

The Report concluded that a comprehensive regulatory impact statement should be undertaken prior to any new or amending policy being introduced in relation to native vegetation and biodiversity regulations, and that it should be made publicly available. The Report recommended that an impact statement should identify and assess problems with the proposed policy, discuss the expected costs and benefits, and provide an assessment of alternative instruments.

A further finding of the Report was that native vegetation and biodiversity policies should be monitored on a continuing basis, and that regular, independent reviews should be published which show the costs and

benefits of the policies with reference to their objectives. The policy and regulatory objectives themselves needed to be clearly identified.

Further information on the Report may be found on the Productivity Commission's website:
<http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiry/nativevegetation/index.html> .

NEW SOUTH WALES

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Nsw Planning Reforms

Currently there are over 5,500 LEPs and planning ordinances administered by local councils in NSW. Some of these predate 1979. In addition, there are over 44 regional environmental plans and some 59 SEPPs. The system has over 3,100 different zoning categories and over 1,700 separate defined terms are used in planning instruments. Some terms have multiple definitions. The Government has announced a major reform package to simplify this system. There are four key components to the package: new strategic assessment and planning, simplifying plan making, improving development assessments, and more flexible use of section 94 contributions. The reforms are a major initiative and follow on from specially commissioned taskforces which have reviewed parts of the planning system. If it is all implemented, it has the potential to simplify and streamline the current maze.

(1) Strategic Assessment and Planning

The government has indicated that it will place a greater focus on high priority, future planning for the state. A **State strategic planning framework** is to be established involving metropolitan and regional strategies and other key documents. The *Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation* will list the type of documents that can be included in the framework. The regulation will require local councils to prepare LEPs to translate key parts of the framework into legally enforceable requirements. This will clarify the State's strategic plans, circulars and guidelines that local planners need to consider when preparing LEPs. The framework will also integrate with catchment action plans and other regional initiatives.

Key regional planning issues that will receive priority attention include Greater Sydney (the metropolitan strategy), the far north, lower Hunter and south coast, the Sydney to Canberra corridor and key growth centres in western NSW. The regional strategies will not be legal instruments and will differ from existing REPs. The strategies will identify settlement patterns, major land release areas, infrastructure and transport priorities, infrastructure costs, appropriate sites for development, locations for economic development and jobs and high conservation areas. Local councils will also be encouraged to develop strategic plans for their LGA. As a consequence of a greater focus on strategic regional planning, the Government expects to reduce the need for the Minister's consent and the concurrence for many development proposals.

(2) Simplifying planning instruments

The number of SEPPs will be reduced from 59 to about 25 and focus on major environment planning issues in key industries and economic activities. A new **Ministerial Consents SEPP** is being developed to establish the criteria for state significant development. The State's reliance on REPs will be reduced through the increased focus on developing regional strategies within the state strategic planning framework. The components of existing REPs that need to be legally enforceable will be translated in mandatory requirements in LEPs.