



TOTAL ENVIRONMENT

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E D I T O R I A L

It's a Waste War

The waste issue – packaging and producer responsibility – has rocketed to a prime place in the environmental debate. Why? We have been told over many years that we are recycling more and many companies have signed onto the National Packaging Covenant. Are environmentalists being alarmist and not giving credit where it is due?

What do the public think? A recent national Newspoll survey (Nov/Dec 2004) found that 84% of people believe that packaging waste is a problem. Three quarters of respondents said that there is too much packaging; that it was mainly caused by packaging manufacturers and business should bear the cost of dealing with the problem. The vast majority wanted government action.

What about the mixed messages the community receives? Surveys show increasing support for improved household practices such as recycling and use of environmentally friendly products. Nevertheless it is forecasted that if serious measures are not put in place, the amount of waste going to landfill from Sydney could exceed eight million tonnes per year by 2020. Clive Hamilton (2003) in his book, *Growth Fetish* describes the dichotomy for the environmentally conscious public, 'While governments exhort their citizens to protect the environment through the slogan 'reduce, re-use and recycle', a huge advertising industry persuades people to 'increase, discard and dump'.

The community and business need to behave consistently with the green rhetoric. The pressure of marketing campaigns, lack of environmental price signals and low profile of product stewardship in business planning, ensures that the green consumer market remains at the margin.

Another major barrier to big advances in packaging waste is the National Packaging Covenant (the NPC). It has achieved very little in five years. Figures obtained by the Boomerang Alliance (representing peak environment groups, including a primary role by TEC) show that a little over 20% of packaging materials are recycled (via kerbside and excluding newsprint which has a guaranteed market).

The NPC prides itself on its cooperative and self regulatory approach. It is a type of light regulation – so light, you would hardly know it exists. In fact the vast bulk of its claimed recycling gains are from kerbside recycling run by local councils that has nothing to do with the NPC member business groups, nor is there any financial support. Nor does the NPC have anything to do with South Australia's very successful container deposit system.

The NPC was intended to be renewed for a second five year term, but it has come crashing down. The NPC Council 2004 version ignored the recommendations from various stakeholders including local government and community groups. The NPC proposed business as usual with a glacial move to 'performance indicators' and weak compliance measures. However, after a campaign to bring the failings of the NPC to the attention of the country's environment Ministers, the 'new' NPC was rejected. The Ministers called for targets and insisted that all signatories comply.

They also required improved consultation with stakeholders. Despite the best efforts of the Boomerang Alliance to obtain information on the consultation process (not wanting to be duped again), nothing was provided. The groups were genuinely interested in developing a 'social contract' with all parties. However, on arrival at the Canberra meeting on January 31, a timetable was unilaterally presented with that day being the only opportunity for 'consultation'. In the meantime the NPC would continue its own internal meetings shutting out the stakeholders.

It was a classic case of an industry arrangement that had grown arrogant and insular. Industry felt that it had captured sufficient bureaucratic involvement and assumed political support. They were wrong. The NPC is now widely acknowledged as 'greenwash'. Environment groups left the meeting in disgust with the message that they would return upon establishment of a real consultation process. Industry and agency refusal to genuinely engage with community groups on packaging waste was the first shot in the waste war.

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Polystyrene Alert

The deluge of new 'juice bars' across Australia has brought with it a growing mountain of non-recyclable and problematic polystyrene. Despite both cups and lids being marked with the number '6' triangle, they end up as litter or in landfill.



Emerging from the crowd of poor performers, Boost Juice has earned itself embarrassing visibility by ignoring a Waverly Council development consent condition since 2003 'not to provide prepared foods to its customers in non-recyclable or non-biodegradable foam.' Having shrugged off the consent condition for over a year, it was only when the Council sought to impose an Order to comply with the threat of a fine that Boost Juice cynically applied to have the development condition removed.

In response, TEC is considering a call to consumers to boycott juice retailers that fail to use recyclable or reusable cups. It is also considering calling for an Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) investigation into Boost Juice's spurious claim on its website that polystyrene is 'environmentally friendly'.

The Problem with Polystyrene

Polystyrene is problematic because recycling is not economically viable, and therefore virtually non-existent in Australia. This is because of its low product-content-to-volume. Polystyrene cups can't be remade into food containers because of the hygiene risks, which means that they can never be part of a closed-loop recycling system. If post-consumer polystyrene packaging is recycled, a new market has to be found for the recovered resin.

In the past, a small percentage of polystyrene has been recycled as an ingredient in potting mix, but the release of small moveable bits of non biodegradable plastic into the environment could be very hazardous and could accumulate in aquatic ecosystems. The viable alternatives include reusable cups which can be used hundreds of times and paper cups that can be recycled.



Coastal Action

Fran Kelly, Natural Areas Campaigner

One hundred and thirty regional coastal and peak environment groups have written to the State Government calling for a rezoning moratorium on the NSW coast while strategic plans are being developed. The moratorium proposal organised by TEC would apply to the entire NSW coast beyond Sydney. The groups, from Tweed down to Gosford and Wollongong to Bega local government areas, say it is necessary to prevent new lands being rezoned for further development before there is an opportunity to properly assess their capability and suitability.

If rezoning greenfield sites for new subdivisions continues while the plans are underway, there is a risk that lands of high conservation value, vital for wildlife and corridors, or needed for infrastructure are lost. The unplanned sprawl could also place an excessive strain on areas where natural resources such as water are already stretched. There would be little point in the Department of Infrastructure Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR) carrying out regional plans across the coastal regions, while developers are busily getting councils to endorse their requests for development rezonings.

Placing this moratorium on the release of new greenfield sites while the plans are being developed will send the message that the Government is serious about doing plans based on the land's capability rather than developers' desires.

Developer Donations

TEC has called for the practice of cashed up developers using hundreds of thousands of dollars to ensure they get control of local councils, to be relegated to the past. Hundreds of thousands of dollars of developer donations made during the Tweed and Shoalhaven elections are prime examples.

Unless developers are taken out of the political process it will be almost impossible to achieve sustainable planning. Most underfunded communities do not have the ability to use extraordinary sums of cash to try and persuade people into voting for them. Democratic elections become a sham when those with the money, seeking to make yet more money, can exercise excessive influence. This is particularly stark at local government level where developers trick people into voting for them by claiming they stand for the environment and community while they really only stand for themselves and development profits.

It is doubtful that many in the community would vote for these people if they really could see behind the smoke and mirrors. If developer donations were banned there would be less chance of the kind of outcomes we have now occurring where developers almost always win a majority on councils and therefore get to dictate what happens to an area's planning and development outcomes. The ban should occur at the State and even Federal level as well.

Take action on packaging waste

Urgent action is needed to help reduce Australia's growing packaging waste problem. We only recycle 20% of packaging via kerbside recycling, and over 80% of the litter items picked up on Clean Up Australia Day is packaging.

State governments are currently considering ways to strengthen the National Packaging Covenant (NPC), the voluntary industry agreement which guides Australia's treatment of packaging waste.

Total Environment Centre is calling for community support to send a message to Environment Ministers to ensure that industry improves its performance on packaging waste. To help, tell your friends to email your state minister at: <http://www.boomerangalliance.org/index.php>



TEC's Green Capital venture is proving to be the leading corporate-NGO forum for sustainability. The first quarter of this year saw work on packaging and product waste, culminating with major business, NGO and government debates in Sydney and Melbourne. Interest was very high, with well over 300 people attending in Sydney and almost 200 in Melbourne.

Next on the agenda is "Sustainable Cities", looking at what businesses can do to be part of the sustainable city. The Sydney Metro Strategy, sustainable transport and 'social infrastructure' such as parks, schools, community halls, and childcare will all be on the agenda.

In August one of the most controversial issues of corporate sustainability will be addressed: Greenwash. As more and more companies realise consumers want to buy 'green', more and more of them choose to create a green image rather than do the harder work of changing the way they do business. Green Capital will be researching the issue and running a major debate.

In July people will be able to choose which superannuation fund they want to invest in. With the total amount invested in super already greater than that on the Australian stock exchange, choice of fund is a big issue. Green Capital would like to see more funds in sustainable, responsible investment. We hope to do research in the area that may be the basis for a campaign on sustainable super.

The business sector continues to become increasingly worried by climate change despite the Australian Government failing to ratify the Kyoto protocol. Green Capital will be working later in the year on a project to educate analysts in the finance sector about the risks associated with greenhouse gas emitting companies and projects. Hopefully we should see more favourable financing for more sustainable projects.

Aside from these major projects, Green Capital is also running a series of policy workshops and forums on such issues as indoor air quality and green purchasing by corporates. Green Capital has a busy year ahead!

Georges River longwall mining threat

TEC's report on the impacts of longwall mining on the Georges River, reveals a dire picture. It focuses on the upper catchment where longwall mining has already occurred and where extensive mining is planned in the future.

The first review by consultants, Eco Logical Australia reveals that damage to the upper Georges River Catchment from mining activities includes fracturing of stream beds and rock falls (such as Marhnyes waterhole at Appin), loss of flows and gas releases. Current remediation techniques may provide limited success in reducing or repairing damage, however the best means of protecting sensitive sites is to avoid mining near these areas. A second review by the Environmental Defenders Office examines current regulatory regimes and approval processes for longwall mining and recommends reforms to these processes to ensure better environmental protection.

The report has been distributed to local government, state government agencies, community groups and published on TEC's website. In addition to the upper Georges River the report has generated interest from other areas facing environmental damage due to current or future longwall mining including the Douglas Park community on the Nepean River and two enquiries from the United States.



The National Coal Club

Jane Castle and Jeff Angel



There is little argument that the National Electricity Market (NEM) has produced far worse outcomes for the environment despite the 1991 COAG injunctions to include 'environmentally sound management'.

The overriding incentive of the market is to sell more greenhouse emitting electricity. Most retailers still actively sell and market air-conditioners despite their role in driving expensive, peak demand. It is now well established that the development of Australian electricity markets has increased, rather than reduced greenhouse gas emissions and the Electricity Supply Association has admitted that there has been a 31 per cent increase in greenhouse emissions as a result of deregulation. It is ludicrous that the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO) claims that 'the accelerating energy market reform measure aims to lower the rate of growth of emissions by improving the economic efficiency of energy supply... Energy market reform is a key element of Australia's greenhouse response.'

The electricity market does not account for any long-run environmental costs such as mining, land use, thermal pollution and climate change. In addition, the NEM does not provide adequate, long term price signals to foster research, development and commercialisation and access arrangements for renewable energy, energy efficiency or demand management.

The NEM is a disaster and recent reforms will make it worse. The 'Standing Committee of Officials' (SCO) that serves the Ministerial Council on Energy (MCE) takes the position that 'a single efficiency focused overarching objective is appropriate for the National Electricity Market', with exclusion of the environmental costs.

It is possible to develop policy instruments such as emissions trading, that aim to introduce environmental externalities, and industry development policies like the Mandatory Renewable Energy Target and initiatives such as a demand management fund. However, the existence of the NEM will work against such initiatives because its sheer political and economic significance cannot be ignored. For instance, if the Energy Ministers are restricted to the narrow objective, this will inevitably flow into the positions they take when state governments make decisions in a range of other areas.

The NEM pretends to adhere to a single objective to avoid confusing multiple objectives, but in fact makes policy development for other community and environmental objectives more complex and difficult. It places the myopic term 'economic efficiency' (which is not devoid of ideological content) at the top of the agenda and reinforces old value and electricity supply systems.

Consultation

The standard of consultation in this process is far from adequate. Accessibility, outreach, information, resources and timelines all rank low. Information on consultation processes themselves are buried deep in government websites and require sophisticated technical and economic knowledge to engage. The process is hampered by restrictively short deadlines and under-resourced community and environment sectors. This poor standard of consultation on critical questions cannot be justified when the ramifications of such decisions are so great.

The problem with consultation can be sheeted home to the early management of the NEM process by a small group with little interest and skill in wider public consultation. Community and environment stakeholders are absent from critical decision making bodies and committees and a culture of excluding the wider community prevails. A perfect example of this was the farcical public hearing on the new national Electricity Law held on the 7th January 2005 during the holiday season. Even the fossil fuel industry complained. The very legitimacy of the NEM is called into question and invites ongoing community attack.

In response, Total Environment Centre has commissioned an extensive, high-level report by international electricity industry expert, Dr Gavan McDonell. The report concludes that the 'reforms':

- > Shut out clean, renewable energy
- > Escalate greenhouse emissions
- > Add unnecessary costs for consumers
- > Prevent energy efficiency
- > Are legally doubtful
- > Side-line the ACCC as competition watchdog
- > Are based on serious economic errors

The 'reforms' are now in the South Australian Parliament as the National Electricity Amendment Bill 2005 which, if passed, will be mirrored in NSW and the other Eastern states. In its campaign for a more functional, clean and efficient National Electricity Market, Total Environment Centre has written to all South Australian MPs calling on them to reject the Bill as it currently stands. We are also calling for COAG to appoint a Productivity Commission or similar Inquiry to urgently explore these issues.

See TEC's website to the report: 'COAG's Quandary: What to do with the Energy Markets Reform Program?'

Sydney Water fails demand management test – again

Despite the universally recognised need to reduce demand for water in Sydney, a recent IPART report shows that Sydney Water is still failing to meet its demand management obligations.



Leight Martin

The 2003/04 Operational Audit conducted by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal concludes that Sydney Water is unlikely to meet its 2004/5 target for reducing potable water use; while the 2010/11 target may be achievable, but only if an optimistic estimate of savings is adopted for the corporation's demand management program. Based on current performance, such an optimistic estimate is difficult to justify.

Sydney Water demand for potable water in 2003/04 was below the Sydney Catchment Authority's safe yield of 600GL/yr, however this was due to the effect of current temporary water restrictions. Without these restrictions demand would have been 618GL/yr. The underlying demand for water is thus continuing the trend of unsustainable consumption seen in previous years.

The audit also highlights key failures in important demand management programs. While some success has been achieved in programs such as "Every Drop Counts", residential retrofitting of water saving devices and leakage reduction programs, these gains have been diminished by poor performance in other areas. Most notable among these are the Department of Housing retrofit program with only 105 dwellings out of 12,500 assessed; and the failure to develop new large schemes for recycling to replace potable water. The cancellation of the Georges River recycled water pipeline being a prime example.

These results strongly point to the need for permanent outdoor water restrictions (such as those adopted in Melbourne) to bring about permanent changes to wasteful water use practices, pricing reform and the development of major effluent reuse projects, along with other measures such as more widespread use of rainwater tanks.

The failure of Sydney Water to develop recycling schemes highlights the importance of an idea by Services Sydney to develop a large scale effluent reuse project to operate in competition to Sydney Water. An application to the National Competition Council (NCC) for a declaration granting them access to the sewerage network was successful with a recommendation to declare the infrastructure available for use by Sydney Services or other competitors to Sydney Water. This was then referred to the NSW government to make a decision about accepting the declaration and ensure access for other organizations to the reticulated sewerage network.

In view of Sydney Water's failure on recycling, it would have seemed an obvious step for the government to welcome the NCC determination, make the declaration and pave the way for other organizations to provide recycled water services. Surprisingly, however, the NSW failed to make a decision with the required 60 day period time which has the same effect as a decision to refuse to grant access. Services Sydney are now left to make an appeal to the Australian Competition Tribunal. With Sydney Water making no serious attempt to develop reuse projects, the future for large scale effluent reuse may well depend on the outcome.

TEC arms community to avoid hazardous chemicals



Another story of a chemical being found in the breast milk of mothers flashed across the pages of the weekend paper - 'Toxic chemical found in breast milk across US' (SMH 26/2/05). These stories clearly add to the distrust and concern within the community of the risks associated with chemical use.

Previous social research has shown the community has an inherent distrust of chemicals used in their homes. Unfortunately, converting this distrust into practical and effective ways to protect themselves is made difficult as they are bombarded with marketing material from the chemical industry.

Through funding from the Environmental Trust, TEC will be acting to educate the community with the knowledge and skills to remove and reduce hazardous chemicals in their homes. The project falls under the wider title of 'Our Environment it's a Living Thing: Integrated Environmental Education Program.' - a landmark collaboration between government agencies and key environmental ngo's including TEC, ACF, NCC and also the human services ngo NCOSS.

The project also brings together two former TEC chemical campaigners, Ben Cole and Jo Immig. Both are excited about the prospects of shifting community perceptions about the use of chemicals in the home.

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