



TOTAL ENVIRONMENT

2006 / ISSUE 3

E D I T O R I A L

Climate Crunch Politics

The big leap in public concern about global warming did not escape the Prime Minister's attention. As Laura Tingle said in the Financial Review, 'will the last climate sceptic to leave the room, turn off the lights.' But is the PM serious?

He has a lot of work to do to convince the public. Right now he is trying to mould his previous positions on coal and nuclear into a climate change response. The fossil fuel and mining industries have his ear. Most government funding is going to 'clean coal' and the nuclear energy taskforce produced the report the PM asked for. He is trying to elevate these two dirty industries to a higher moral plane, in the pursuit of fighting global warming.

He talks about a 'new Kyoto' which is just a piece of slick greenwash to make it appear he is on board with public concerns. Polling shows the vast majority of the community want Australia to ratify the current Kyoto. He complains about the absence of India and China from Kyoto, but ignores the fact that they were always going to be included the second round. He suggests that China by its non-appearance in Kyoto, is doing nothing. But it has much bigger renewable energy targets than Australia and is committed to a 20% efficiency improvement. And he does nothing to get the biggest polluter, the USA, on board.

After years of condemning emissions trading; the Kyoto protocol that embraces this economic mechanism; and attacking his opponents on the basis that a carbon price will wreck the Australian economy and send power prices through the roof – he is now investigating it. The only problem is, he is setting up a select industry investigation group, and is deaf to calls to include environmentalists and consider the joint state taskforce that has just produced a major plan.

TEC has been working hard to get emissions trading onto the public and business agenda. We have facilitated environment group consensus on the key principles. In November we held two Green Capital debates in Sydney and Melbourne with mining and electricity industry groups and will be issuing several briefing notes next year.

The main differences that emerged at the debates were:

- How serious is the problem and therefore how deep the emissions cuts should be;
- Whether we should wait until clean coal technology is proven and then have an emissions trading scheme or start now and encourage a range of alternatives;
- Could we have a future with diminishing coal power after 2020, when coal plants reach their use-by-dates through renewables, geothermal, energy efficiency and gas?

The arguments put forward by the TEC and ACF panelists were well supported by the business and NGO audiences of 480. Environment groups are ready for one of the biggest and most important economic debates this country has seen, with or without the Prime Minister.

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ACTION ON WASTE

Electronic Waste Recycling

In a major development TEC and Environment Victoria have joined with e-recyclers Sims, MRI, TIC and the NSW Local Government Association to form the Let's Do IT! Alliance to lobby for urgent government action. State and federal governments have been talking...and talking...with computer manufacturers for several years with no agreement on a voluntary take-back scheme. Meanwhile TEC and other environment groups are rung by concerned computer users about what to do with their old machines. While we have issued a national guide to companies and charities that will recycle computers, these operations only account for 1.5% of computers. More than 1.6 million are dumped in landfill each year wasting precious resources and leaching heavy metals.

The new Alliance is calling for the banning of e-waste from landfill and an immediate start to a take-back law either at the national level, or if the federal government will not act, then by states acting alone. Both NSW and Victoria, and WA by next year will have legislation that allows separate action. Local councils are also agreeing to TEC's proposal to charge computer companies for the cost of local collection and recycling.

The best policy would be for a deposit or advance disposal fee to be put on each computer. This would fund a collection service and recycling. To dramatise the waste problem, TEC held a 'dump action' outside the Department of Environment (see photo).

It was timed for a day before federal and state environment ministers met to discuss e-waste and other issues.

The meeting was held in New Zealand on 24 November. The Ministers announced they 'were disappointed' that several major brand owners, importers and small computer manufacturers failed to engage in the voluntary efforts. The Ministers recognised that voluntary approaches were unlikely to work and directed officials to explore regulatory options for the recycling of computers. The Ministers 'confirmed their enthusiasm for delivering a cost-effective computer recycling system to the Australian community as soon as possible.' They will consider this issue during 2007.

84 groups for plastic bag ban

Eighty-four environment groups have called on NSW Minister for the Environment, Bob Debus, to ban the free plastic bag and to stick to his promise of regulation, if industry-government agreements fail. Each year the free plastic bags given out are equivalent to 11,500 tonnes of greenhouse gases.

Victoria is legislating for such a ban, why not NSW?

The signatory groups from across NSW represented thousands of community members who want to see plastic bag use reduced dramatically. TEC was swamped with responses since initiating the letter. Every year we delay means 1 billion more plastic bags are handed out in NSW alone, in addition to wasted resources and greenhouse gas emissions. Tens of millions will pollute our parks, waterways, streets and beaches every year.

There is proven damage to wildlife caused by plastic bag litter and the Federal Government has declared plastic bags and other marine debris a direct threat to 20 marine species, and a Key Threatening Process under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.



Coastal strategies move into top gear

Despite repeated commitments by Environment Ministers across Australia, and an agreement made by all Australian Governments with the Australian Retailers' Association to phase out plastic bags by the end of 2008, it appears the industry is attempting to break its deal. The failure by retailers to meet 2005 voluntary plastic bag reduction targets show that we need regulation now. The industry has argued there will be large costs at operational and consumer levels. However, viable reusable alternatives already exist; shop staff are already familiar with filling reusable bags; and once the shopper buys such a bag its cost becomes increasingly negligible with each shopping trip.

NSW waste progress stalls

The quietly released departmental review of the NSW Waste Strategy hides some disturbing trends. It avoids showing progress made towards the achievement of the critical 2014 targets. Reporting does not state overall tonnes to landfill, tonnes recovered and how this has changed since 2000. This absence suggests the NSW Government is 'blind' to the impact of its strategies on targets. Equally problematic is the failure of the draft to identify expected future progress.

In the absence of a coherent indication of progress towards the 2014 goals in the draft Strategy, Total Environment Centre did its own analysis. This showed that progress is limited, at best, and falls well short of the progress needed to achieve the 2014 goals:

- Waste generation in Sydney has increased from an estimated 6,870,000 tonnes in 2000, to 8,810,000 in 2004/05, **an increase of nearly 2 million tonnes pa.**
- Although overall resource recovery has increased dramatically, it has not been enough to counter the increase in waste generation, as a result **waste to landfill has increased by 70,000 tonnes pa.**
- Waste generation is **likely to increase to 11.29 million tonnes pa in 2015.**
- To address this increase in waste generation, **an extra three million tonnes in recovery would be required** to meet the overall diversion target of 64% – and there would still be four million tonnes of waste disposed of to landfill – the same amount of disposal as we have now.
- The target was to have held waste generation levels to 2000 despite economic and population growth. Instead, **waste generation has risen.**

TEC is aware that a number of municipal councils are signing waste management contracts that could improve the level of recovery by advanced technology. However, if the government does not have a clear idea about what is happening; is avoiding accountability on the targets; and is not planning to take further action on waste minimisation, then the Strategy will fail.

TEC will be lobbying for a reinvigorated waste policy in the upcoming State Election.

After several years of drafts, workshops, consultations and submissions the long sought after coastal strategies are being finalised, with the Lower Hunter and South Coast most advanced.

The **Lower Hunter** Regional Strategy has benefits for the natural environment, but also risks to sustainability. It includes conversion of over 20,000ha of State owned land into National Parks or conservation area, along with potentially thousands of hectares of private land. There will be substantial new Parks in Port Stephens, The Green Corridor, and in the Cessnock LGA. It is an achievement that may never have eventuated without a strong community campaign over many years and the opportunity provided by the Strategy.

However, the final plan leaves a sour taste for many local campaigners because government did deals with the 'large landholder group' who have caused much community angst over the years with massive and damaging proposals. While this group is not getting their big ambit claims, some of the development areas in the Strategy (particularly at Catherine Hill Bay, Ellalong and Sweetwater) are likely to cause ongoing anger in local communities.

Additionally the government has yet to explain how the large increase in isolated greenfield sites will fit with community needs for better public transport. There will be a lot of problems in the future if young families and retired people cannot get access to community services.

The findings of an Independent Panel reviewing 17 development sites on **South Coast** also carry a mixed bag of environmental outcomes.

While bringing reasonable protection to key areas of native vegetation, the recommendations still favour overdevelopment, lack infrastructure planning and rely upon developers to deliver best environmental practice.

Good environmental outcomes are recommended for key sites around the Merimbula, Wallaga Lakes and Wollumboola however the report also gives a green light to developments at the Tathra River Estate and Wollumla West in areas that had been nominated for conservation.

In the Bega Valley there is a gross oversupply of land already zoned for urban subdivision and there is no need for the expansion of Tathra Rivers Estate into a further 300 lots. The recommendations also assume that developers can deliver best environmental practice to protect water quality – a very risky assumption.

In its submission to the Panel TEC rejected 15 of the 17 south coast sites as being unsuitable for future development on the grounds that they are inconsistent with the Draft South Coast Regional Strategy. Key principles such as adjoining major towns or growth centres to maximise efficient use of infrastructure; avoiding fire risk and traffic problems have not been adhered to by the Panel.

TEC is calling on the State Government to strengthen the environment protection and sustainable planning outcomes for the sites and produce a comprehensive conservation plan for the region.

GREEN ENERGY UPLIFT

NSW Premier, Morris Iemma announced a 15% by 2020 renewable energy target at TEC's Green Capital event, 'Climate Crunch' on 9 November. Environmental groups had been campaigning for 25% by 2020; however the new policy allows the state target to be increased upwards only, after a review in 2013.

It's a significant move and joins the state's greenhouse gas abatement scheme (GGAS), a world first in emissions trading. The new scheme will support green generation anywhere in Australia (like GGAS); and be aligned with the Victorian renewable target administration – establishing a major mainland Australian effort.

Unlike the discredited federal scheme which only aims for 2% and is virtually filled years ahead of schedule (and the Howard government refuses to increase the quota), the two states are gearing up for big cost reductions in solar and wind because their targets will increase commercial capacity. It's essential that renewables are in a better competitive position by 2020 because Australia will be looking to refurbish old coal power stations around this time. It would be a tragedy if we invested in more coal.

Now the big gap in the attack on greenhouse emissions from the electricity sector is energy efficiency. Both NSW and the Commonwealth governments lack a target to drive investment by industry. So far they have laws requiring energy savings plans from big business, but it is not mandatory to implement them.

GreenPower ADVICE FOR CONSUMERS www.greenelectricitywatch.org.au

TEC has led a consortium of peak environment groups in reviewing green electricity products available in Australia. Tens of thousands of people are subscribing to them, but are they making a difference to our emission levels? The review found some dodgy products. We also rated the best, those products that provide the most new generation.

There are significant differences between the various GreenPower products on offer and how far they go in reducing our greenhouse gas emissions. Groups such as ACF and TEC have many requests for advice from people who are confused by the wide array of claims made by retailers. Green Electricity Watch makes it easy for consumers to make the best choices and ensure they are buying products with the best environmental results.

Electricity consumption is the biggest cause of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions – by buying electricity with the highest amount of accredited GreenPower, we help boost the demand for clean, renewable energy which immediately cuts our own greenhouse emissions.

Dodgy products withdrawn

As part of TEC's work on green electricity it has become clear that some products that were not accredited by GreenPower were misleading consumers into thinking that they were 100% renewable and compared well to more expensive products that invested in new green energy. In fact the so-called 100% products were based on existing hydro, which would have been bought by consumers regardless of whether there was a special green product. They did not lead to a reduction in Australia's current greenhouse emissions.

TEC made a complaint to the ACCC about the misleading claims specifically by Energy Australia and Jack Green. However both companies are now withdrawing these products.

TEC is now concentrating on what is called 'backfill'. You can buy accredited GreenPower that has various proportions of new green generation (usually the more generation the more expensive) – and the rest is old hydro which allows the 100% tag to again to be used. We think the product should simply say how much new green power there is, without the spin. Consumers will then choose based on price and how much new green power they want to support.

National Electricity Market reform

The National Electricity Market (NEM) does not get much publicity but it can't be ignored. The NEM, where we buy and sell power, has been set up to maximise dirty fossil fuels and is rapidly becoming out-of-date with concern about global warming. The NEM is the biggest source of Australia's greenhouse emissions yet there has been no attempt to ensure it responds to the challenge of global warming. It needs to be reformed so it can help rather than hinder governments from acting on climate change.

Moves are also being made to hand state rules to the national regulators when none of the national bodies have responsibility for the environment or social goals. This will result in conflict between state government policies on climate change and the national bodies that are only required to meet narrow economic objectives.

A new TEC report, *How Should Environmental and Social Policies be Catered for as the Regulatory Framework for Electricity Becomes Increasingly National?*, has been prepared in consultation with law firm, Gilbert + Tobin. It proposes the inclusion of specific social and environmental objectives in the NEM.

The electricity industry needs to be sent consistent signals that they should be investing in reducing demand for electricity and bringing cleaner sources of electricity into the grid. Regulators need to reinforce this message through pricing and incentive approaches and regulations which make it easy to manage demand and generate renewable energy.

The report proposes two new additional NEM objectives, based on the UK model adapted for Australian conditions, to help ensure the states' existing environmental and social goals are recognised in national regulation. It reviews three models for designing and implementing environmental and social policies within a national framework, from a state-by-state model to a national design and implementation model.

In 2003 the Ministerial Council on Energy announced a major energy reform program, in response to the COAG Energy Market Review which was chaired by Warwick Parer. The report *Towards a Truly National and Efficient Energy Market* recognised that a pronounced growth in emissions from electricity had occurred since competitive markets had been introduced. It recommended the removal of structural impediments to demand management in networks and the implementation of an emissions trading scheme. While the economic efficiency reforms identified by Parer were taken on board by the Ministerial Council in its reform program, emissions trading was rejected by the Commonwealth Government and progress on improving the rules for demand management has been slow. TEC is now meeting energy advisors and officials to urge reform of the NEM.



Water Moves

Leigh Martin, Urban Campaigner

Late 2006 has seen some major developments in urban water management in NSW. Some, such as new legislation to promote competition in the recycled water sector and establish a new Central Coast Water Corporation, are a major step forward. A proposal by the NSW Government to build a new dam in the Hunter, however, will set the cause of sustainable water management back more than 30 years.

New laws

In the final session of Parliament for 2006 two key pieces of water legislation were passed. The first of these, the Water Industry Competition Bill, will allow the private sector to enter the recycled water market and compete against current water utilities. The new Act specifically requires that any private sector operators create new sources of supply through recycling rather than simply acting as retailers of current supplies.

This is an important reform as the current utilities have shown no commitment to developing recycling. Without private sector involvement there seems little chance of meaningful levels of recycling being achieved. Under the Act new operators will be subjected to similar regulatory arrangements to current utilities, including operating licences and rigorous operational audits. TEC made a detailed submission on the discussion draft of this bill. Many of our suggestions were reflected in the Bill ultimately presented to Parliament.

The Central Coast Water Corporation Bill creates a new Central Coast Water Corporation in place of the current Joint Water Supply Authority managed by Gosford and Wyong Councils. The new corporation will be owned by the Councils, however for the first time it will be subject to similar regulation to Hunter and Sydney Water with an Operating Licence and audit provisions. With major water supply challenges on the Central Coast TEC has been deeply concerned by the lack of accountability and sustainability of present water management on the Central Coast as evidenced by the sustained push by the Councils to develop desalination.

In a crucial development TEC was successful in negotiating an amendment for the Act to include a special objective for the corporation to pursue water conservation and recycling.

A dam!

A major blow to sustainable water management, however, was the announcement by the NSW Government of its intention to build a 450 Gigalitre dam on the upper Williams River to supply the Hunter and Central Coast areas. The dam will damage the ecology of the Williams River and cost at least \$400M. This will have to be recovered from Hunter and Central Coast residents in the form of higher water bills. This dam was abandoned more than 30 years ago when pricing reform and demand management made it unnecessary.

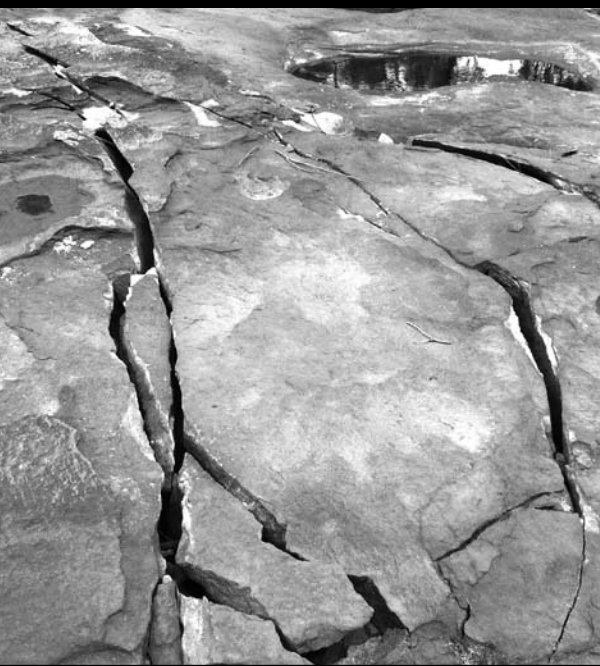
The real reason for the proposed Tillegra Dam can be found in the recently released draft Regional Strategy for the Central Coast. The strategy proposes a population increase of 65,000 over the next 25 years. If however, current water supply problems are overcome it is proposed that population growth should be 100,000 in the same period. It is clear the Hunter and Central Coast Water customers will effectively be asked to subsidise the profits of Central Coast land developers

TEC will actively oppose the proposed Tillegra Dam. We will be working with other groups to stop this unnecessary and unsustainable proposal and to promote sustainable alternatives such as recycling and more effective water conservation.



LONGWALL CRISIS

Dave Burgess, Natural Areas Campaigner



A new report by TEC gives a damning account of the damage longwall coal mining continues to inflict upon a number of rivers and creeks in NSW (see our website). Longwall mining is a form of underground mining introduced to Australia in the 1960's that results in far more dynamic land subsidence than the traditional methods.

The latest damage to be exposed has occurred in the Waratah Rivulet south of Sydney, which provides Woronora Dam and Sutherland Shire with 29% of its drinking water. Following reports of cracking in the riverbed, an inspection was organised through the Sydney Catchment Authority in November. Discovered was some of the worst examples of riverbed cracking yet seen, failed attempts at remediation and a complete loss of flow in large parts of the waterway. In some places the now dry riverbed tilted visibly to one side and anecdotal evidence suggests that water has ceased to flow in places never previously dry. A rare upland swamp in the headwaters of the catchment has possibly been drained and tilted.

The NSW Government introduced a new approvals process for longwall mining in 2004. Intended to offer greater environmental protection, the process is failing with the Primary Industries Minister appearing to rubber stamp applications for further longwall mining. Monitoring of water flows and subsidence,

and remediation work is promised but nothing much changes. The Minister approves new mining almost invariably without any conditions added.

The NSW Scientific Committee declared longwall mining a Key Threatening Process in 2005. However the cracking and draining of river and creek beds and underground aquifers, cliff falls, the draining rare swamps, fish kills, methane gas bubbling to the surface, iron oxide pollution and the release of wastewater into river systems continues to occur across the four coal mining regions of New South Wales and in Sydney's water catchment. A Threat Abatement Plan was never completed.

TEC has instructed the EDO to prepare drafting instructions for legislation in relation to longwall mining including the establishment of a 1km buffer zone around rivers and creeks. We are also working with over a dozen local groups to campaign for better protection.

HELP THE ENVIRONMENT TODAY FOR OUR FUTURE

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

TEC and the environmental battle can be greatly assisted with your volunteer time and skills.

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PO Box A176, Sydney South NSW 1235

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