

## The Environmental Report Card

For this edition of Infocus, Senator Hill, the Federal Environment Minister agreed to respond to a number of questions put to him by NELA on a range of environmental issues. His responses have been summarised below.

### Major achievement

When asked to identify the major achievements of the current Federal government, Senator Hill highlighted the *Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* [EPBC Act] as “the most important piece of environmental legislation ever passed by the Commonwealth Parliament.” The Act has now been in force for over twelve months and transition is stated to have been a success. “Over the first twelve months, the Act has been triggered by a range of actions that potentially threaten nationally endangered species, Ramsar wetlands, world heritage areas and other matters of national environmental significance. For example the act has been triggered by actions such as: seismic testing in blue whale feeding areas, residential development affecting threatened species habitat, aquaculture development adjacent to the Great Barrier reef, major water infrastructure projects and various mining and industrial proposals.”

In relation to this, the Commonwealth updates section on page 10 makes mention of the decision by the Environment Minister to require an EIS with respect to a proposal to conduct seismic testing in waters adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef.

### Our biggest threats

Whilst the *EPBC Act* has established a national framework for natural resource management and environmental protection, the Minister identified salinity and water quality as the biggest threats to Australia’s future sustainability. When the *EPBC Act* was first released for public comment as a Bill in 1999, one of the criticisms directed towards the draft legislation was that it did not include critical issues such as salinity and water quality in the listed matters of national environmental significance.

The figures paint a stark picture: “five percent of our cultivated” is ruined by dryland salinity. “About one third of our rivers need help to stay alive. Within 20 years Adelaide’s drinking water will exceed World Health Organisation salinity standards in two out of every five days.”

A National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality has been adopted by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments with \$1.4 billion committed over seven years (\$700 million from Commonwealth funding) “to support action by communities and land managers in 21 of the worst affected areas.”

### Australia’s position on Kyoto

Prior to the talks in Bonn on the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol, Senator Hill comments did not bode well for its future: “without the US the Kyoto deal is dead” (*The Australian*, Friday 30 March 2001, 8)

As you would know however, some remarkable negotiations took place in Bonn and the world’s leaders emerged with new faith in the future of climate change laws. Senator Hill remarked – “Negotiations at Bonn were a success for the international community. The Bonn Agreement is the biggest step forward on an international response to climate change since the Kyoto Protocol was agreed in 1997.” Given the real likelihood that another failure at Bonn would have spelt the death knell for the Protocol, his comments could not be more accurate.

Australia pushed very hard to have the use of ‘carbon sinks’ expanded at Bonn and was ultimately successful in having the European Union withdraw their objection to the proposal by Japan, Canada, Russia and Australia (the Umbrella Group) to allow carbon sinks to be used in calculating emission targets. Senator Hill’s recognises the significance of this achievement: “The draft agreement on sinks was perhaps the most significant positive outcome for Australia. ... We have a great capacity for absorbing CO<sub>2</sub> into revegetated areas and forest plantations and the agreement at Bonn ensures the benefits of these activities can be recognised.”