

### *Inaugural Meeting of the Environment Protection and Heritage Council*

The inaugural meeting of the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) took place in Hobart on 2 May 2002, chaired by the Federal Minister for Environment and Heritage, Dr David Kemp. The EPHC agreed to a wide range of initiatives responding to priorities identified in the State of the Environment report released in March 2002. Initiatives agreed at the meeting include:

- *World Heritage*: ways to progress proposals for World Heritage listing of the Cooloola Sands extension to the Fraser Island World Heritage Area and the listing of Tasmania's convict sites;
- *National Heritage Policy*: development of an integrated national heritage policy covering natural, indigenous and historic heritage, with a particular focus on the heritage tourism industry,
- *Heritage Places*: establishment of a task force to develop more effective incentives for the conservation of heritage places by government, industry and the community;
- *Participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*: development of an action plan to find new ways to build partnerships with Indigenous communities;
- *Air Quality*: joint Commonwealth, State and Territory funding of a \$200,000 study of the link between air quality and human health;
- *Waste Management*: endorsement of an industry strategy to reduce the level of electronic waste going to landfill;
- *Chemicals*: development of a national approach to ecologically sustainable chemical management and regulation, in consultation with the Primary Industries and Health Ministers Councils;
- *Working with Business*: a meeting of Ministers with Australian business leaders at a Sustainability Summit, after the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August~September, to seek ways of improving the environmental performance of business; and
- *Finance Sector*: a forum to be held to explore ways the finance sector can encourage improved environmental performance by business.

The new Council, comprising ministers with environmental protection and heritage responsibilities, encompasses matters previously dealt with by the National Environment Protection Council, environment protection matters from the Australia and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council and the Heritage Ministers Meeting. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to formation of the EPHC at its meeting on 8 June 2001, as part of a restructuring of ministerial councils.

### *Second Meeting of the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council*

The Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council held its second meeting, in Hobart, on 2 May 2002, and dealt with a range of natural resource management issues. The Council comprises Federal, State and Territory Ministers with responsibility for the environment, water, natural resources and primary industries.

**The Council:**

- , reviewed progress in implementing the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) and supported commitment by COAG to accelerate implementation of the NAP, including by signing of the Intergovernmental Agreement by all parties; concluding the remaining bilateral agreements by the end of June 2002; and making substantial progress on regional plans in all jurisdictions by the end of 2002;
- , agreed to initial funding for the Market Based Instruments program under the NAP;
- , agreed to develop as a matter of urgency a national communications strategy for the NAP, to be developed by the Commonwealth for agreement by Council;
- , endorsed a strategic framework for the delivery of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) which incorporates agreed funding principles;
- , agreed on a number of national frameworks to govern the delivery of natural resource programs, including accreditation criteria for natural resource management plans, to form the basis for NAP and NHT regional investments;
- , endorsed the National Natural Resource Management Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, established to assess the progress of the NAP and the NHT Extension;
- , agreed that the Commonwealth, with the States and the Northern Territory, will explore a new approach to coastal management issues that could benefit from national cooperation;
- , confirmed its workplan for the immediate future, and identified key issues as the national Environmental Management Systems framework; a high level review of the current water reforms, including an assessment of progress to date; developing a national approach to genetic and biochemical resources; identifying priorities to be addressed to improve Australia's national fisheries resource management arrangements; and reviewing the development and implementation of the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas;
- , agreed to implement the Natural Resource Management Action Plan for Advancing Indigenous Reconciliation;
- , agreed to establish an annual working community advisory forum, based on NAP on NHT regions and including community partners and experts in natural resource management;
- , welcomed an arrangement for expert scientific and technical advice through the preparation of an annual report prepared by CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology;
- , considered a report on water reform from its Standing Committee's Chief Executive Officers Group on Water (CEOGW) and requested CEOGW to bring to the next Council meeting key options for progressing issues arising from the report prepared by jurisdictions for COAG on water property rights regimes; and
- , endorsed a voluntary code of practice for firewood merchants.

## *Gene Technology Update*

(See also *National Environmental Law Review* No 3/2001)

### ***Ministerial Council***

The Gene Technology Ministerial Council held its inaugural meeting on 24 May 2002. The Council oversees the national regulatory framework for gene technology in Australia a national cooperative scheme involving the Commonwealth and all States and Territories. It comprises Ministers from a range of Commonwealth, State and Territory portfolios, including health, agriculture and the environment.

The Council agreed to a process for the development of policy principles that may be issued by the Council to establish parameters for the national regulatory system and to govern the work of the Gene Technology Regulator.

Under the *Gene Technology Act 2000*, the Ministerial Council has the power to issue a policy principle which would recognise areas designated under State or Territory law for the purpose of preserving the identity of genetically-modified (GM) or non-GM crops for market purposes. The Gene Technology Regulator must then recognise such areas when issuing licences for dealings with GM organisms. The Council agreed to start work on the development of a policy principle to provide constitutional certainty for GM/GM-free designated areas declared under State or Territory legislation.

Ministers also agreed to the Operating Procedures that will govern the work of the Gene Technology Standing Committee. This committee comprises officials from all jurisdictions and provides support to the Ministerial Council.

### ***Declaration that State Laws are Corresponding State Law***

On 16 May 2002 the Hon Trish Worth MP, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, declared the following State laws to be corresponding State law to the *Gene Technology Act 2000* (Cth) and the *Gene Technology Regulations 2001* (Cth):

- , *Gene Technology Act 2001* (Vic)
- , *Gene Technology Regulations* (Vic)
- , *Gene Technology Act 2001* (SA)
- , *Gene Technology Regulations* (SA)

These declarations facilitate the operation of the national scheme by, among other things, enabling the Gene Technology Regulator to exercise powers under Victorian and South Australian legislation.

### ***Appointments to Gene Technology Committees***

On 22 May 2002 Minister Worth announced appointments to the chairs of three committees established under the *Gene Technology Act 1999* (Cth) which provide advice at the request of the Gene Technology Regulator or the Ministerial Council.

The former Governor-General, Sir Ninian Stephen, is the chair of the Community Consultative Committee. This committee provides advice on matters of general concern to the community in relation to genetically-modified organisms (GMOs).

Professor Donald Chalmers, Professor of Law at the University of Tasmania, is the chair of the Gene Technology Ethics Committee. This committee provides advice on ethical issues relating to gene technology and any codes of practice or policy principles developed by the Regulator or the Ministerial Council.

Professor Stephen Powles, Director of the WA Herbicide Resistance Initiative attached to the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Western Australia, is the chair of the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee. This committee provides scientific and technical advice (including on individual applications), and replaces the former Genetic Manipulation Advisory Committee.

### *Release of Air Toxics Discussion Paper*

At its 20th meeting in June 2001 the National Environment Protection Council (NEPC) resolved to develop a national environment protection measure (NEPM) for Ambient Air Toxics. It is expected that a draft NEPM will be developed by April 2003.

The NEPC is seeking input from interested parties on the appropriate approach to reducing the exposure of the Australian population to air toxics, and has released a discussion paper for public comment. The paper is available at [www.nepc.gov.au](http://www.nepc.gov.au).

Air toxics include the following general categories of compounds: volatile and semi-volatile compounds, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, heavy metals and aldehydes. There is growing international recognition of the potential health risks associated with exposure to air toxics and the need for action to minimise these risks.

### *Mining and Sustainability Report Released*

The Australian mining industry has released its report, *Facing the Future: The Report of the Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development Australia Project*. The report discusses key issues related to the Australian mining industry and sustainable development.

The report is the result of more than fifteen months research and consultation coordinated by the Australian Minerals and Energy Foundation (AMEEF). It will contribute to the Global Mining Initiative and the mining sector's input to the World Summit on Sustainable Development to be held in Johannesburg in August-September 2002.

The report is available via the AMEEF web site at [www.ameef.com.au](http://www.ameef.com.au).

### *Review of River Management Legislation*

A report commissioned by the National Rivers Consortium of Land and Water Australia has put forward a model legislative framework, which identifies key components applicable to water resource legislation. The report is based on a study of water resources law in four States South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia.

The report is available at [www.users.bigpond.com/jon.nevill/index.html](http://www.users.bigpond.com/jon.nevill/index.html).

### *Australians Less Concerned about the Environment*

The reported level of concern about the environment by Australian households has dropped to its lowest level since recording by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) started. The ABS publication, *Environmental Issues: People's Views and Practices* (Cat. No 4602.0) reports that 62 per cent of Australian households reported being concerned about the environment in 2001 compared with 75 per cent in 1992. The report also records people's responses in relation to membership of environmental organisations, donation of time and money to environmental protection, and water conservation practices.

### *Murray Darling Basin Policy Discussion Paper*

The Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) has released for public comment a policy discussion paper *How to Encourage Sustainable Land Use in the Dryland Regions of the Murray-Darling Basin*. The paper, prepared as part of the Landmark Project, contains suggestions about ways to make land use and management more sustainable.

The paper and further information about the Landmark Project are available via the MBDBC web site at [www.landmark.mdbc.gov.au](http://www.landmark.mdbc.gov.au).

### *Using Management Accounting to Improve Environmental Performance and Profitability*

The Institute of Chartered Accountants is undertaking a research project to help Australian businesses to use management accounting techniques to improve both their environmental performance and profitability. This will seek to address such questions as what is a benefit and what is a cost when a company improves its environmental performance, and how can this be reflected in business accounts.

The project will include five case studies in the following organisations:

- , AMP
- , Telstra
- , The Michel Group
- , Methodist Ladies College, Perth
- , Cormack Manufacturing

The project is being funded jointly by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments. It is one of a number of initiatives that the two governments have introduced to encourage the finance sector to contribute to sustainable development.