

COAG Agrees to a National Water Initiative

On 29 August 2003, at its meeting in Canberra, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) announced its agreement to develop a National Water Initiative—a set of measures to reform the use of water in Australia.

COAG agreed that there is a pressing need to refresh its 1994 water reform agenda in order to increase the productivity and efficiency of water use, sustain rural and urban communities, and to ensure the health of river and groundwater systems.

The initiative aims to:

- establish a nationally-compatible framework of water access entitlements and improve the security of water access
- ensure ecosystem health by implementing regimes to protect environmental assets at a whole-of-basin, aquifer or catchment scale
- ensure water is put to best use by encouraging the expansion of water markets and trading
- encourage water conservation in the cities, including better use of stormwater and recycled water.

The details of the initiative are to be negotiated over the coming months and set down in an intergovernmental agreement, to be considered at the first COAG meeting in 2004.

In recognition of the particular pressures facing the Murray–Darling Basin, the member jurisdictions of the Basin also agreed to contribute \$500 million over five years to address water over-allocation in the Basin. The contributions are: Commonwealth (\$200 million); New South Wales (\$115); Victoria (\$115); South Australia (\$65 million) and the Australian Capital Territory (\$5 million).

Environment Ministers Agree to Industry Code of Practice for the Management of Plastic Bags

On 1 August 2003, Australia's Environment Ministers, meeting as the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC), agreed to accept a revised Code of Practice developed by the Australian Retailers Association (ARA) for the management of plastic bags.

The Code:

- supports an EPHC target of a 75 per cent reduction in bag litter by the end of 2005
- sets a target of 50 per cent reduction in plastic bags by December 2005, with a 25 per cent reduction achieved by the end of 2004
- sets a recycling target for lightweight high density polyethylene (HDPE) bags of 15 per cent (via in-store return) or 30 per cent of available bags through combined in-store and kerbside recycling by the end of 2005 (effectively a commitment to recycle all available bags)
- commits the retailers to work with the plastics and recycling industries to phase out HDPE bags that do not contain recycled content as soon as practicable
- commits to a national community behavioural change campaign
- will strive for a 90 per cent participation rate of the ARA supermarket and chain members in the Code and encourage smaller retailers to adopt the Code's initiatives.

The Ministers' agreement to the Code was on condition that it includes the following:

- baseline data on current levels of use and recycling will be provided by all signatories to the Code
- a transparent auditing standard and process will be put in place

- regular reports (e.g. six-monthly) on implementation of the Code will be made to EPHC Ministers and will be publicly available
- retailers would provide a transparent, fair market choice between lightweight single-use carry bags and multiple-use bags
- the ARA would enlist the signatures of as many small independent retailers as possible.

The Ministers also agreed:

- to support the phasing out of lightweight single-use carry bags containing HDPE within five years and to ask the ARA to enter into negotiations during the life of the Code to specify actions beyond 2005 to achieve this objective
- to seek legal advice on how retailers may provide information on the true costs of single- and multiple-use bags, to allow consumers to make an informed choice
- the ARA will be required to provide a revised version of the Code incorporating the matters specified by the Ministers prior to the EPHC meeting in October 2003
- if the Code as amended is not implemented and/or targets not reached, Ministers will again look at implementing mandatory measures, and work on the development of these measures will continue.

A National Approach to the Management of Chemicals in Australia

In May 2002 the EPHC established a high level National Chemicals Taskforce to scope issues with, and the need for, a national approach to ecologically sustainable chemical management and regulation in Australia. The taskforce had representation from the health, safety and primary industries ministerial councils and environment protection agencies (EPAs).

The taskforce report concluded that, while Australia has made significant progress towards ecologically sustainable chemicals management, more work is needed. The EPHC considered the taskforce report in May 2003 and established a Working Group, chaired by the NSW EPA, to develop a proposal for a national environmental risk management framework for chemicals. The Working Group will also investigate options to address other priority areas identified in the taskforce report. In doing so, the Working Group will consult with relevant ministerial councils, government agencies, industry and the community.

The taskforce report, *Scoping Paper—Towards Ecologically Sustainable Management of Chemicals in Australia*, is available from the National Environment Protection Council website at www.nepc.gov.au. Also available from the website is the supporting document, *Supporting Information—Towards Ecologically Sustainable Management of Chemicals in Australia*.

Action to Protect Australia's Biodiversity from Climate Change

On 26 August 2003 the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Dr David Kemp, announced that the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments are developing a National Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan. This will begin with an Australia-wide consultation process, beginning in September 2003, with an intention to submit the draft plan to the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council in April 2004.

Dr Kemp also released *Climate Change Impacts on Biodiversity in Australia*—an assessment by the Biological Diversity Advisory Committee and the CSIRO of how Australia's changing climate is affecting Australian reefs, forests, grasslands, rivers and animals and plants. The report identified a range of adverse effects from climate change on Australia's biodiversity.