

in focus

An interview with Mick Bourke, Chairman, EPA Victoria

Mick took over chairmanship of the EPA just over 12 months ago, with a hard act to follow in replacing the highly regarded Dr Brian Robinson. NELR caught up with Mick at Southbank on 27 October 2003 to find out how he was approaching his new role.

Firstly, on Mick's background, we discovered Mick brings to the EPA considerable public sector business management experience from his earlier roles as the CEO of various water authorities including the Coliban Water Authority (based in regional Victoria, at Bendigo) and City West Water (in Melbourne). As manager of City West Water, in the industrial heartland of Melbourne, Mick was already familiar with the some of the EPA's major clients, and this has helped greatly in allowing him to make a smooth transition.

In Mick's view, Victoria's pollution situation is generally well managed by industry but there is still room for improvement through a more holistic approach focusing on resource efficiency. Thus he considers the most important challenge facing the EPA is to establish strong communication with business managers. This is generally not a problem for large corporate businesses, which typically have a well informed environmental management team. However, many small to medium sized enterprises are commonly managed by individuals or couples with little free time to look at environmental issues, and as a consequence, they may be very suspicious of approaches from the EPA. Mick believes one of the best ways to sell environmental strategies to this SME sector is through partnerships with industry associations such as the Australian Industry Group. In this way the EPA can be involved as a contributor to industry based training sessions, and more sustainable business practices can be introduced as cost saving management strategies, rather than a compliance issue.

One common problem is businesses that may be under trading difficulties or subject to parent company policies which restrict cash-flow for capital investment in new pollution control strategies, and more sustainable product design. In particular, Mick feels frustrated when the EPA can see that the required expenditure would be a very sound investment as the cost of such improvements would be recovered very quickly through reduced operating costs. Nevertheless Mick has been pleased to find that many businesses can still achieve great strides under a tight budget, and he mentioned the recent efforts of Mobil at its Altona Refinery as a good example.

Mick also had some interesting observations on the role of government. Firstly, as a result of privatization of infrastructure such as the electricity generation plants, the business may have severely restricted cash flow because the purchasers may have overestimated business returns. This problem is exacerbated when you consider that government funding is also compromised as it has foregone the profits from these former state owned enterprises. Another related question is how much infrastructure should be provided by government – for example if drainage facilities are provided to a new industrial estate, businesses may assume they have a right to discharge. It may be a better strategy from a sustainability viewpoint to not provide drains so that businesses will manage (and hopefully eliminate) waste on-site.

In conclusion, it seems clear that the State of Victoria and the EPA have done extremely well to pick up such a highly personable and well seasoned natural resource manager for this key role.