



## COMMUNIQUE

1 July 2005

### MINISTERS ACT ON POLLUTION, WASTE AND WATER

Environment Ministers took action on waste, water and air pollution today at the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Environment Protection and Heritage Council (EPHC) in Perth.

Measures agreed to include the phase out of plastic bags by the end of 2008 and the first national study of how air pollution affects children's health. Action on water includes the labelling of outdoor water appliances, the development of national health and environment guidelines, and a strategy to boost water recycling by reducing unnecessary salts and chemicals in detergents.

#### **Plastic bags to go, stronger action on waste**

Plastic bags' days appear to be numbered, with governments noting a phase out agreement from the Australian Retailers Association. Council noted that retailers were seeking supportive legislation to eliminate plastic bags from January 2009. The draft agreement would see retailers working to phase out the use of lightweight plastic carry bags by the end of 2008.

While Council is expecting to consider a proposed agreement at its first meeting in 2006, Ministers have indicated that any decision to pursue further voluntary reductions between 2006 and 2008 will be influenced by the ability of Group 1 retailers to reach their 50 per cent target by the end of 2005. Ministers have also asked for regulatory options to be further developed by early next year.

In the mean time, Ministers encouraged all governments to implement new landfill and public place litter guidelines as part of the overall programme to keep plastic bags out of the environment.

Governments entered into a new agreement with industry to reduce packaging waste and to increase recycling over the next 5 years. The **National Packaging Covenant** commits signatories to allow no further increases in packaging waste to landfill and to a national recycling target for packaging of 65% (up from the current 48%) by the end of 2010.

All sectors will need to work together to achieve these targets, including companies in the packaging supply chain, manufacturers, waste collectors, local governments and recyclers, the Australian and all state and territory governments.

The National Environment Protection Measure (NEPM) for Used Packaging Materials has been streamlined to support the strengthened Covenant. It will ensure voluntary action is backed with strong legislation, and governments are sending a strong message that action will be taken against companies that don't meet their obligations. A clear small business threshold for the new NEPM will be developed for consideration by 30 September 2005. Ministers stated it was not their intention that businesses producing small amounts of waste be affected by the NEPM requirements.

Ministers today agreed to initiate the development of a **National Environment Protection Measure for Product Stewardship** to help industry reduce waste from everyday consumer

products like televisions and computers. The NEPM would be part of a co-regulatory approach to support a level playing field for industries that undertake voluntary initiatives to reduce the environmental impacts of the products they produce.

Ministers also released an analysis of submissions to the recent EPHC discussion paper *Co Regulatory Frameworks for Product Stewardship*. Over 80 per cent of stakeholders voiced their support for national product stewardship approaches through co-regulation. There was strong industry support for co-regulation of tyres, televisions and computers.

Under co-regulation, governments and industry would negotiate agreements to improve the design, collection, reuse and recycling of consumer products. While initiating the development of a NEPM, Council stressed that other possible approaches would be fully canvassed during consultation with stakeholders. Any sectors working on voluntary initiatives would still have to demonstrate that they can deliver substantial environmental results for governments to enter into a co-regulatory approach.

The EPHC noted progress towards an agreement with the **mobile phone** industry to address the environmental impacts associated with their design, manufacture, use, disposal, and recycling. Negotiations are exploring the possibility of an agreement with industry that includes targets and reporting.

### **Air Pollution and Children's Health**

EPHC today announced the start of a nationally-based study of the relationship between air quality and child health in Australia. Jointly funded by the Australian Research Council, the study aims to determine whether current air quality standards adequately protect the health of Australian school children. No study of the type and breadth envisaged has been conducted previously in Australia.

Current Australian air quality standards have been based on overseas data. Such studies have demonstrated adverse effects, but effects may be different in Australian populations. A benchmark criterion for air quality standard setting is the protection of the health of children. The study will recruit a sample of over 3,000 children from all over Australia. Results will quantify the health benefits of tightening standards. This will inform the review of Australia's national standards, beginning this year.

### **National Water Initiative**

Water was a priority on the Council's agenda, and it agreed to work with the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council that leads in the implementation of the National Water Initiative Agreement. It agreed to:

- oversee the 'Smart Approved Water Mark' labelling and endorsement programme for outdoor water using products and services. It complements the national Water Efficiency Labelling Scheme (for indoor water-using products such as showers and washing machines) by dealing with outdoor water use issues such as garden design, irrigation, and even car washing equipment.
- develop national health and environmental guidelines for water-sensitive urban design, targeting safe recycling of sewage and grey-water, and the capture and use of stormwater.
- develop guidelines for evaluating options for water-sensitive urban developments.

The EPHC discussed a national strategy to reduce the salts and other chemical fillers that provide bulk in many **washing detergents** but make recycled water difficult to reuse. It will undertake work to investigate options for a national product standard for detergents that reduces salts and other chemicals that inhibit water recycling.

## **Dioxins**

A draft National Action Plan for addressing dioxins in Australia released by the Council today sets out how governments can keep levels of dioxins low and reduce or eliminate them where feasible. The plan responds to studies under the Australian Government National Dioxins Programme that found that background levels of dioxins in the environment and the Australian population are generally low.

The Action Plan will help meet Australia's obligations under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. Comments are invited on it from industry and the community by 26 August 2005.

## **National Pollutant Inventory**

At the meeting of Council in Perth, Ministers received a review of the National Pollutant Inventory and agreed to its public release. The review made many suggestions to improve the effectiveness and coverage of the Inventory. Council decided to begin a variation of the NPI to improve information provided to the community. Council decided to include greenhouse gases in the scope of the variation process (noting that there are other mechanisms that could be used) to be informed by the outcomes of the EPHC/MCE Joint Working Group. The variation would also include consideration of the transfer of substances from one location to another, as well as the direct emissions of pollutants.

The Australian Government did not support proceeding with the variation at this time noting that relevant collaborative work with the Ministerial Council on Energy is yet to be completed and that the relationship to greenhouse work initiated by COAG needed to be clarified.

## **Greenhouse Gases**

Ministers agreed to support the development of best practice reporting and public disclosure of greenhouse gas emissions and abatement.

## **Heritage Management Plans**

State and Territory governments agreed to work with the Australian Government to bilaterally accredit management plans for World Heritage and National Heritage places. This joint approach will avoid duplicating government approvals for development proposals that comply with accredited management plans.

## **About the EPHC**

The Environment Protection and Heritage Council is made up of ministers from Australian state and territory governments, New Zealand Government and the Papua New Guinea Government. It aims to ensure that governments work together with communities to achieve and enhance a healthy natural and cultural environment in harmony with social and economic goals.

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