

Submission by Julia Richards to the

INQUIRY INTO ECOLOGICAL CARRYING CAPACITY OF THE ACT AND REGION

As an ACT resident, I welcome this Inquiry and consider it to be timely.

Population growth

I particularly draw the attention of the Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water to research undertaken by Monash University's Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy about Australia's capacity with a growing population to meet even small reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Although dealing with the issue at a national level, the research is relevant to the growing population in the ACT and Region and the consequent likely failure of achieving the ACT Government's greenhouse gases reduction targets.

In January 2010 under the Copenhagen Accord, the Federal Government undertook to meet unconditionally a 5% reduction in GH emissions by 2020 from the year 2000 levels, that is, by 28 million tonnes. However, Birrell and Healy took Treasury modelling further than Treasury itself had done. This revealed that without new abatement measures our emissions will increase by 21 million tonnes from 2000 levels. **They found that 83% of this GH emissions growth would be due to population increase.** They concluded that it is very unlikely that Australia will meet this target without addressing population growth (1).

Canberra was established in the Murray-Darling Basin to provide a national capital, not a booming city consuming ever more resources and thus bearing down a heavier and heavier ecological footprint. Principal amongst relevant resources are land and water.

Land

In a hungry world, land would be better utilized for agriculture in the nation's food bowl, the Murray-Darling Basin, and to protect high conservation value habitat that is home to threatened and vulnerable species of both plants and animals. The ACT has some of the best, if not the best, open natural woodland in New South Wales and the ACT. Species of open woodland birds, native mammals and plants are diminishing at a rapid rate as their habitat is destroyed for housing and infrastructure for new inhabitants. Examples of this have recently occurred in O'Malley and Weston and for Gungahlin Drive Extension.

I am aware that a significant portion of ACT public funding comes from sale of land leases. To replace these, other sources of income need to be found. I suggest that consideration of introduction of death duties as such a source.

Water

Water is precious. The Australian Conservation Foundation has recently released analysis showing that healthy rivers and wetlands provide economic benefits to

communities and industry in the Murray-Darling Basin worth around \$2.1 billion a year (2). There are no healthy rivers without adequate water.

Water has been over-allocated for decades throughout the Basin, and latterly to the ACT under the Murray-Darling Basin Cap. The recently released Guide to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, the product of the best available science, states that **returning 3,000 billion litres of water to the Basin's rivers will give only a LOW certainty of achieving a healthy outcome** while returning 7,600 billion litres will give a high certainty. To achieve even the 3,000 billion litres, water allocations throughout the Basin, including those to the ACT, will need to be cut about a third on average.

In any case, the outlook for water for irrigated agriculture and for Canberra is poor since most climate scientists are in agreement that **climate change will reduce rainfall in southern Australia while increasing evaporation rates through temperature rise** (3, 4). Despite the recent rain, the South Eastern Australian Climate Initiative, a collaborative research project between CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology and other Government agencies, has reiterated that drier conditions well into the future are to be expected in south eastern Australia (5). The Garnaut Report stated that irrigation in the Murray-Darling Basin will have declined by 92% by 2100 (6).

The rivers and farmers throughout the Basin have been doing it tough from lack of rainfall during the past 13 years, whereas Canberrans have learned to live successfully with Stage 3 water restrictions. The rivers, then farmers, should surely have preference over a Canberra that does not need to grow further.

Other resources

With the highest average income in the nation and thus the capacity to buy more, **the ACT is also the heaviest per capita consumer of many resources and producer of waste**. Immigrants typically take on the lifestyle and spending patterns of their new communities. Encouraging others to come here is not only adding to our ecological footprint by virtue of numbers, but also the intensity of the footprint of the nation.

Social impacts

Negative social impacts of population growth and thus an increased ecological footprint include increased traffic congestion, air pollution, water restrictions, increased housing prices from unmet demand, as well as the need for more infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and roads, loss of green space and longer commuting times. The creation of more jobs in Canberra has led to large numbers of people commuting by car over long distances from NSW towns such as Yass, Braidwood and Goulbourne resulting in more traffic crashes and, of course, more greenhouse gas pollution.

Population increase in Australia is largely the responsibility of the Federal Government. Both major electoral parties have long pursued policies of high immigration and, more recently, increased birth rates with the baby bonus. However, the ACT Government has added to this increase through its **'Live in Canberra' program**, even to the point of funding teams of recruiters in overseas countries targeting overseas professionals, such as

doctors and nurses, and business people. The ethics are ugly of recruiting professionals whom we have not educated and trained from developing countries, such as South Africa, where they are clearly needed more than here. To indulge in programs, such as 'Live in Canberra', is irresponsible.

I recognize the need for individuals also to accept personal responsibility for limiting their ecological footprints. To this end I have a solar hot water system and 16 solar photovoltaic panels on my roof that predate the introduction of the solar feed-in tariff. I drive a hybrid car but routinely take the bus several days a week and more when feasible. I support the reduction in the ACT's water allocation recommended in the Federal Government's Guide to the Murray- Darling Basin Plan.

I ask that the Inquiry recommend the:

- **termination of the Live in Canberra program;**
- **acceptance by the ACT Government of the recommended reduction in the ACT's water allocation;**
- **adoption of a policy to limit strictly and possibly decrease Canberra's population to ecologically sustainable levels; and**
- **encourage individuals to limit their ecological footprints, including the sizes of their families.**

Julia Richards

References

1. Birrell & Healy, People and Place, Vol 17, No. 4, 2009
2. Healthy Rivers – Economic benefits of a healthy river worth billions, Australian Conservation Foundation, 20 October 2010,
http://www.acfonline.org.au/articles/news.asp?news_id=3189
3. International Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007
4. CSIRO & BoM 2007, Climate Change in Australia: Technical report 2007, CSIRO, Melbourne
5. South East Australian Climate Initiative, CSIRO et al., 2010
6. Garnaut Climate Change Review www.garnautreview.org.au/chp6 2008