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Sustainability and the Environment

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Secretary
Select Committee on Regional Development
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601



Dear Mr Lloyd

I am writing in response to the invitation from the Select Committee on Regional Development for public submissions to its Inquiry into Regional Development.

The Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment (OCSE) has an ongoing engagement with the Australian Capital Region (ACR). This includes, among other things, considering the region in the context of ACT State of the Environment Reporting and through Regional State of the Environment Reporting. We continue to engage with local Councils throughout the region on matters of environmental management and reporting and on sustainability issues in the region.

As the Office's engagement with the region focuses on these matters, this submission will focus on point d) of the inquiry;

d) Further cooperation at the local government level on environmental and conservation matters and building community resilience to deal with natural disasters, extreme weather events and climate change.

This Office produces the ACT State of the Environment Report (SoER) every four years and also produced SoERs for the region from 1997-2009. The SoERs allow us to gain an insight into environmental and sustainability issues across the region and how we can and should respond to these issues and challenges on a broader regional scale.

It is well recognised that environment and sustainability issues cross jurisdictional boundaries and the ACT Government has long recognised the need to engage with the NSW Government and with surrounding NSW local councils on these issues.

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A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the ACT and NSW Governments in December 2011. One focus of this document is to resolve cross border matters in the region and plan for better ways to provide government services. The MoU identifies several priority actions to take place across the region.

The ACT Government has also had an ongoing engagement with the region through forums such as the South East Regional Organisations of Councils, (SEROC) and has recently strengthened this relationship by becoming a member “Council” of SEROC.

The ACT/NSW MoU

The MoU between the ACT and NSW Governments identifies *Landuse Planning and Infrastructure* as one of the priority objectives and actions. This include the identification of a mechanism to deliver collaborative strategic land use and growth related infrastructure planning across the South East Region and the development of a new strategic plan for land use and infrastructure requirements reflecting the unique characteristics of the region.

The Strategic Regional Direction and Priorities discussed within the MoU focus on economic development, however environmental considerations should be factored in when discussing a plan for the development of the region.

SEROC

The objectives of SEROC include the promotion of regional sustainability and the facilitation of regional planning. The SEROC Management Plan 2012/13 sets out the objectives and goals that SEROC would like to achieve over the 2012/13 period. These include several goals with a focus on the environment and/or promoting sustainability.

Objective 2 of the plan is to **Promote Regional Planning & Sustainability**. Goals associated with this objective include improving environmental sustainability, undertaking resource recovery and waste avoidance projects, improving the capacity of organisations to restore and enhance the environment, and improvements to transport, health and infrastructure systems within the region.

Objective 3 of the plan is to **Develop Regional Cooperation and Resource Sharing**. This objective includes improving service delivery and operational efficiency through measures such as the facilitation of sharing knowledge, expertise and resources.

The objective and actions identified through the MoU and by SEROC are reflected in the recommendations and findings made by this Office in State of the Environment Reporting and other papers.

The paper “Progressing Sustainability in the ACR” was commissioned by the OCSE and focuses on the common themes emerging from the ACT and Regional State of the Environment Reports. This paper identified four key areas which the Region could focus on to prepare for future challenges and to foster sustainable development. These areas were renewable energy, water and land management and building adaptive communities.

This year my Office looked at the most recent (2011-12) State of the Environment Reports produced by the Councils in the ACR. This work has highlighted five issues that stand out for the local government areas within the ACR which are also important issues for the ACT.

The major themes identified through this process were atmosphere (including air quality), biodiversity (including invasive species management), land (land use and management), solid waste, and water (including quality and availability).

The 2011 State of the Environment Report for the ACT included several recommendations to Government based around the need for a regional approach to managing all aspects of our environment and for achieving sustainability and resilience. Key recommendations from several of the identified “focus areas” are outlined below and may help to provide a framework for moving forward with regional cooperation on environmental and sustainability matters.

Biodiversity

Managing biodiversity includes a number of factors including habitat protection and effective reporting and monitoring. The 2011 SoER found that the lack, and sometimes inadequacy, of relevant data is an ongoing challenge for not only reporting but also for the effective monitoring and management of the ACT environment. Good environmental management requires good data in order to produce, and improve on, evidence-based strategies. Access to reliable data is also important to regional Councils and the availability of regional data sets would be an important step in improving biodiversity management.

The 2011 SoER recommended that the ACT:

strengthen research, planning and practical projects to enhance biodiversity conservation in the ACT through collaborating with NSW Government and regional organisations to contribute to regional and national biodiversity data sets.

Further, the 2011 SoER posited a more strategic approach to planning and development across the region. The report recommended that there be:

1. *better integration of biodiversity values within urban planning through:*
 - a. *integrating biodiversity corridors and habitat connectivity in the Territory Plan process; and*
 - b. *identifying, where possible, appropriate clearance thresholds for ecological communities across the ACT to maintain and improve biodiversity values and guide development decisions. To complement this, the draft biodiversity offset policy should be finalised to ensure no net loss in ecosystems.*

Land and Water

In improving land and water management into the future, it is important that we treat the resources, not as commodities but as part of the total ecosystem. The management of these resources should build resilience to expected climate change impacts. We are part of the wider Murray Darling Basin and catchment management should not stop at jurisdictional boundaries. Projects such as the Murrumbidgee Reach Demonstration Project illustrate the benefits of cross-jurisdictional and multi-partnered community engagement in catchment management.

The 2011 SoER made the following recommendations in regards to water management at a regional scale.

1. *Establish cross-boundary management of the ACT's water resources including:*

a. developing catchment policy and an integrated water supply catchment management strategy, as recommended in previous State of Environment Reports; and

b. strengthening integrated management action by facilitating improved exchange and use of information, such as spatial information, between government agencies, Natural Resource Management groups and Catchment Management Authorities, and by promoting sustainable catchment management with landholders and the community.

Waste

The 2011 SoER did not provide specific recommendations around managing waste on a regional scale. However, it is recommended that waste management be considered on a broader regional scale, particularly as this is an issue identified both within the SEROC Management Plan and in SoERs produced within the region. It is appropriate that this process looks not only at how and where to dispose of and handle solid waste produced by communities within the region, but also looks at educative measures that can be employed within the region to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill.

Climate Change

Climate change and variability have become increasingly important issues and will continue to present challenges and opportunities in the region into the future. Professor Ross Garnaut identified in his 2008 report a number of potential impacts if greenhouse gas emissions continue unabated. Professor Garnaut stated that climate change will intensify the challenges already facing biodiversity and ecosystems. These challenges include:

- widespread loss of native vegetation and habitats;
- reduction of water quality and availability;
- isolation of habitats and ecosystems; and
- Increased adverse environmental effects from plant and animal pests.

Professor Garnaut stated that alpine species are particularly at risk as the range of their habitats is already limited. Disruptions to natural ecosystems and biodiversity will also have a flow on

effect to the natural assets that we value such as clean air, clean water and fertile soil, all of which contribute directly to human health and wellbeing.

In order to plan and build resilience for the likely impacts of climate change, the ACT and region need to work together. The adoption of a well resourced coordinated and integrated management approach to land, water and other natural resources is essential if we are going to protect the long term integrity of these natural resources for now and for future generations.

The 2011 SoER recommended that planning for climate change take a regional approach, in partnership with NSW Government and local region councils and organisations, and should include opportunities for renewable energy development.

The report also states that in the coming decades, impacts from climate change are likely to become increasingly prevalent in the ACT. The most likely future climate scenario for the ACT includes the strong likelihood of mean temperatures continuing to increase, along with more frequent and severe heatwaves for the ACT and region. So in planning for climate change, the ACT and ACR must include adaptation and resilience.

The 2011 SoER recommends that the ACT:

2. *Develop a climate change adaptation planning and implementation response through:*

- a. *building on existing, and undertaking additional, sector vulnerability risk assessments;*
- b. *establishing a monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement methodology and framework as a consistent guide for Government, to develop, progress and report against adaptation planning; and*
- c. *integrating adaptation planning outcomes into existing ACT planning and management frameworks.*

As with recommendations around biodiversity, while these recommendations are ACT focussed, they can be applied to regional planning. Climate change impacts are not limited by jurisdictional boundaries. Much will need to be done across the region to adapt to climate change. Climatic and environmental conditions of the Australian Capital Region are highly suited to a number of renewable energy industries. The ACT Government, working with the NSW Government, regional development authorities and local councils, could develop this region into a leader in renewable energy.

The 2011 SoER recommended the following approach to regional planning for climate change – noting that any approach needs to be done in partnership with NSW Government, local councils and regional organisations. It was recommended that this approach focus on:

- *opportunities for renewable energy development;*
- *water security;*
- *urban and regional planning;*
- *transport management; and*

- *adaptation of ecosystem services to climate change.*

Responding to climate change requires a fundamental change in our planning and decision making processes. It also calls for considered and decisive action. With the effects of climate change already being felt, maintaining the status quo or making only minor changes is unlikely to secure an effective and successful future for the region. The 2009 Regional SoER highlighted that ACT, NSW and local governments need to work together with business and communities to progress sustainability and to help build a strong, healthy and resilient Region. It recognised that this will take innovation, commitment and strong action.

Many of Canberra's urban elements are close to, and inclusive of many of the natural features of our landscape such as bushlands, reserves and waterways that provide risks from fires, floods and storms. In order to respond to risks associated with climatic changes, the 2011 SoER makes the following recommendations:

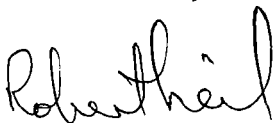
- *Align and integrate climate adaptation planning and disaster risk management where appropriate. This should include lessons learned from changes to fire management.*
- *In collaboration with NSW Government and local councils, develop a regional approach to planning and risk management to address future challenges of population and climate change.*

The growing population of the ACT and region is a factor placing pressure on all aspects of environmental management and sustainability. This brings many challenges relating to land use, transport for commuters, the use and availability of infrastructure and services and the pressures this places on the ecology of the region.

Growing urban and rural residential populations need to be planned with consideration given to fire vulnerability, water availability, and the impact of urban and peri-urban areas on ecosystems, ecological connectivity and waterways. The impacts of a changing climate also need to be considered in planning decisions.

These issues stretch beyond ACT and Council boundaries. Difficult strategic decisions on issues such as regional ecological connectivity, growth patterns and development polices need to be at a regional scale to determine future sustainable growth in the Region.

Yours sincerely



Robert Neil
Commissioner for Sustainability
and the Environment