

Regional State of the Environment Report 2004-2008

Commissioner's Observation's

The Commissioner's Observations are delivered in a style that is mindful of ensuring that this Regional Report which constitutes 17 individual reports can be used both individually by each local government area, and regionally as an effective tool for community engagement and as information to guide future strategic planning into the next decade and beyond.

The 2008 Regional State of the Environment Report (RSoER) identifies key issues and trends that point to a landscape that is changing and will continue to do so as climate change, population changes, resource management and other issues continue to impact the Region.

Table 1: Key issues and trends from the 2008 RSoER

	Coastal Councils • Eurobodalla • Bega Valley	Alpine Councils • Tumut • Tumbarumba • Snowy River • Bombala • Cooma/Monaro	Major Regional Centre Councils • Queanbeyan • Yass • Goulburn/Mulwaree	Inland Councils • Young • Boorowa • Upper Lachlan • Cootamundra • Harden • Gundagai • Palerang
Population Size change	Increased population	Declining population	Increased population	Declining population
Population age change	Aging population	Aging population	Aging population	Aging population
Key employment areas¹	• Professional services • Services	• Primary industry • Services • Professional services • Manufacturing	• Government • Professional services • Services • Trade	• Primary Industry • Professional services • Services • Trade
Primary land use	• Conservation • Agriculture • Timber production	• Conservation • Agriculture • Timber production	• Agriculture • Bushland • Conservation	• Agriculture • Bushland • Conservation
Weather	Generally hotter and drier	Generally hotter and drier	Generally hotter and drier	Generally hotter and drier
Water Availability	• Higher potential evaporation • Water restrictions	• Higher potential evaporation • Water restrictions	• Higher potential evaporation • Water restrictions	• Higher potential evaporation • Water restrictions

¹ The ACT and its region: economic relationships and key drivers of economic growth Report by Access Economics Pty Limited for the Chief Minister's Department, 2008
http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/2944/AE_ACT_Linkages.pdf

The Australian Capital Region (ACR) has the third largest non-metropolitan population in Australia (after NSW Hunter Region and the Queensland Gold Coast). The Region enjoys wonderful natural ecosystems such as our beaches and Alps which form the base of a healthy tourism industry, we have rich soils for growing many crops and a wealth of knowledge both in the ACR and in the nearby large capital cities of Sydney and Melbourne. The Region provides much of the nations earning from agriculture, minerals and high value produce as well as Government administration, centred in Canberra but also throughout the ACR.

The RSoER presents an assessment of ecological and socio-economic data for 22 indicators² that fall within four environmental issues papers addressing Atmosphere and Weather, Biodiversity, Catchments and Resource Use. The indicators used for the 2008 RSoER are based on those used in the previous three regional reports. Certain indicators were revisited at a RSoER Regional Workshop by Councils in 2006.

The data for the RSoER has been sourced from Councils as well as other sources such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Catchment Management Authorities and NSW Government Agencies, in particular, the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change (DECC) and the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI).

In this paper, 6 observations are shared that I believe would assist in developing a better picture of the state of the Region's environment and assist decision makers in developing effective future policies and directions. This paper should be read along with the Regional Sustainability Chapter which provides a discussion on ideas for sustainability in the Region.

Observation 1: Catchments, Water security and availability.

Water, along with climate change, is one of the key challenges facing the Region. Like the Murray–Darling Basin, the ACR has been functioning under drought conditions during the entire reporting period. Over this reporting period many Councils have introduced schemes and incentives for reducing the consumption of water at both a residential and a commercial level. The reuse of waste water and the introduction of rebates for installation of water tanks and the mandating of further water restrictions have been introduced in certain Council areas.

Councils have also invested in community education around water use for example, in Cootamundra media in relation to the installation of a gross pollutant trap for stormwater and the recycling of all effluent has been used as a trigger for community behaviour change, whilst at the other end of the scale but equally important Yass Valley Primary have developed a storybook/colouring book on water.

These actions need to be supported and encouraged. At an institutional level Council's are encouraged to:

- continue to work closely with their Catchment Management Authority, to implement joint projects and ensure consistency in approach to land and water management and complementary actions.
- continue to ensure impacts on ground and surface water quality are considered in landuse zoning, development applications, sewage and water supply treatment.

² The 22 indicators are air emissions, contaminated sites, discharges to waters, drinking water quality, ecological communities, fire, groundwater, hazardous water, heritage, land degradation, land use, native species, noise, outdoor air quality, pest animals, pest plants, population, riparian conditions, solid waste surface water quality, water use and weather.

- continue and build on the effective relationships with NSW and ACT Governments agencies to ensure up-to-date information regarding condition of the catchments environmental drivers such as salinity, and associated management issues relevant to them.
- monitor and adapt to the impacts of climate change to ensure no significant detrimental effects are sustained from the changing conditions and any future actions.
- work towards managing water at a regional and inter-regional scale.

Observation 2: Ecosystems services and Biodiversity protection

As highlighted in the Biodiversity issues paper, Councils are in a prime position to take a leading role in protecting and enhancing these vital ecosystem services. A range of activities in the Local Council areas during the reporting period were aimed at improving the condition of native ecosystems and the habitat of native species and reducing the pressures on them. At a State level, the NSW Government has amended the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* to introduce Priorities Action Statement, increasing the number of reserves in the protected area system, and natural resource management reforms. At a local level, Councils need to continue to ensure diversity aspects, in particular consideration of native species and ecosystems as well as local threatened or vulnerable species are considered in planning for and implementing landuse zoning, assessment of development applications, road management and construction activities, stormwater management, hazard control burning and weed control activities.

It is important to improve our knowledge of the region's biodiversity through linking databases and information relating to biodiversity across government agencies and Councils. This, and close liaison with these agencies to encourage programs of data collection will aid conservation planners, land managers and members of the public to gain a clearer and more up-to-date picture of biodiversity within the region and associated management issues relevant to it. Of particular importance, especially in the long term, is the development of a method for assessing vegetation condition that is common across the region (or the State). Monitoring and reporting vegetation change in a clear and consistent way will assist in long-term planning and protection of ecosystems and developing ecosystem connectivity across the region.

This is being undertaken by the CMA's and is also give prevalence in the draft of the recently release Commonwealths " Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2020.

The current proposals for structural and governance changes to the Rural Lands Protection Board if implemented needs to be done in a framework that has least impact on the ecological values of Travelling Stock Routes, these unique corridors exist across the State. In light of the precautionary principle any suggestion that the land that forms these stock routes should be set aside and sold for future development needs to be very carefully considered within a strategic approach to using them as important ecological corridors.

Observation 3: Limited availability of data

One of the challenges of reporting at any level of government is the limited availability of data. *Australia National State of Environment Report 2006* reads "It is still not possible to give a comprehensive national picture of the state of Australia's environment. This is because we the lack accurate, nationally consistent environmental data".

This statement may be equally applicable to all levels of Government including the 17 Councils that make up the ACR. Councils have been of great assistance in supplying data, where available, and checking the quality of data and papers for this RSoER. One key

observation is the limited amount of current and accessible data available for certain environmental indicators. Land degradation and land use indicators are clear examples where up-to-date data was difficult to source in some cases and not possible to source in many council areas.

Australia State of Environment Report 2006 reads “recent Indicators need to be periodically reviewed to ensure that those used are the most relevant in a changing policy and environmental context. Only experience will determine whether indicators are useful and whether they can be simplified. In other words, environmental indicators have a life cycle – they need to be developed, used and discarded if they are not deemed to be relevant for an environmental issue or if they are unnecessarily difficult to populate.

One of the key challenges for Councils, and for producing the RSoER has been collecting the wide range of data required for the 22 indicators across the 17 Council areas. The proposed legislative changes to environment reporting at a NSW State level from 2010 onwards allows Council to determine the most important environmental issues for the Council area to focus data collection and reporting on. This may help to reduce the burden of monitoring and reporting on Councils and allow them to focus on their community’s future needs. However it is important that Councils develop systems to identify future challenges and changing needs in environmental monitoring and reporting.

Observation 4: Relevant Data set interpretation

One of the challenges in preparing the RSoER was the number of agencies collecting data but with a limited strategic regional approach. We need to improve strategies to assist with a strategic approach to data collection and sharing between agencies. Millions of dollars each year of public and private funds are spent on collecting environmental data across the region (and State, Territory and Australia wide) however much of the information appears to be collected in what appears to be an “information silo” where data at one level cannot easily be interpreted meaningfully with data provided at another level or from another agency, so the data picture given may be less clear or of less value. As highlighted in *Australia State of Environment 2006* the plethora of environmental indicator sets and the associated administrative arrangements (both within organisations and across jurisdictions) has set up unrealistic expectations that agencies are able to report using all these environmental indicators. The reality is that, even when indicators are agreed and data are available to populate them, expertise and specialist knowledge are still required to interpret data results and another range of expertise is needed to interpret the implications of the data for policy-making purposes.

There is no one institutional agency that has responsibility for the development, management and review of environmental indicators, nor can their specialist interpretation to ensure policy-makers use them in relevant decision-making processes.

Again highlighted in *Australia State of Environment Report 2006*

"There is a tension between reviewing and discarding indicators and building long-term datasets to populate the indicators."

Indicators are only useful for showing changes in the environment where time series data are available. The ongoing use and refinement of indicators is a continuous balancing act between the two objectives of getting the most informative indicators and getting time series data on the indicators already in existence".

The reality is that data may not be available at suitable scales for aggregation or disaggregation to populate environmental indicators. Not all indicators used at a national scale are suitable for use at a jurisdictional or regional scale. There may be some that can be aggregated up from a regional scale to a national scale and some that cannot. The indicators being developed for the National Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for implementation

by the 57 Natural Resource Management regions are examples of indicators that will mostly be used at a regional scale.

While many reporting organisations have benefited from the lessons learned and sharing of indicator development across Australia, constant changes to the information collected and reported, and the methodologies used for its analysis continue to make the development of consistent indicators and data collection a challenge.

Observation 5: No legal requirement for air quality monitoring for populations under the “threshold”- Ambient Air Quality National Environment Protection Measure

The National Environment Protection Measure (NEPM) monitoring was intended to provide data that represented the *exposure* of the population to ambient levels of air pollution. However, protocol states that monitoring is not required in communities with a population of less than 25,000³. While there is flexibility in the NEPM for jurisdictions to conduct monitoring in other areas, in practice it seems as though the population threshold has guided monitoring. Smaller jurisdictions have commented that the threshold makes it difficult for them to obtain resources to monitor in regional centres that may have air pollution problems but have populations less than 25,000⁴.

Within the ACR the majority of the 17 Councils have populations that are under 25,000. At a practical level the cost of installing and maintaining the air monitoring stations is expensive. As a result, undertaking voluntary monitoring in regional and rural areas with small populations has not appeared to be high on the agenda. It has been suggested in these anecdotal conversations that there is an increasing incidence in respiratory problems amongst all ages of the population and particularly in the young. I encourage policy work at a jurisdictional level between the States and Territories to look at strategies and mechanisms for addressing issues such as environmental health.

Observation 6: Reporting and monitoring of noise complaints

Noise is one of the eight mandated sectors for reporting under the New South Wales *Local Government Act 1993*. However, until this 2008 RSoER Councils have had trouble meeting this requirement, mainly due to a lack of financial and human resources. A typical example of this reads as follows

“In the previous reporting period Goulburn Mulwaree Council did not have a system in place for recording the number of noise complaints received, nor were any figures available from the New South Wales (NSW) Police”.

In this RSoER 2008 most Councils provided data on the number of noise complaints. However a small number are still yet to put mechanisms in place for collecting this data.

³ Clause 14 of the monitoring protocol states:

(1) Subject to sub-clauses (2) and (3) below, the number of performance monitoring stations for a region with a population of 25,000 people or more must be the next whole number above the number calculated in accordance with the formula: $1.5P + 0.5$, where P is the population of the region (in millions).

(2) Additional performance monitoring stations may be needed where pollutant levels are influenced by local characteristics such as topography, weather or emission sources.

(3) Fewer performance monitoring stations may be needed where it can be demonstrated that pollutant levels are reasonably expected to be consistently lower than the standards mentioned in this Measure.

⁴ Discussion Paper - Review of Air Quality NEPM 2005

With increasing urban growth in many council areas, resources to undertake regular ambient noise monitoring would be a welcome step forward.

The main noise complaints appear to be in relation to barking dogs and these numbers have generally escalated. Other complaints include noise from residential and commercial premises, noise due to urban expansion and development and in some of the larger Council areas noise from industrial premises, in certain cases activities are carried out under an Environmental Protection Authority licence where conditions of the licence would include noise limits, monitoring etc.

The range of mechanisms for dealing with these complaints range from the practical - with Councils hiring out citronella collars for the dogs - to the legal, issuing nuisance dog controls under the *Companion Animal Act 1997* or inviting the parties to the noise dispute to mediation.

Having introduced mechanisms for reporting and monitoring noise complaints, it appears that the future challenge for many Councils is conducting ambient noise monitoring. Typical findings read as follows:

'Shire Council did not undertake any ambient noise monitoring during the reporting period therefore it is not possible to report on recent trends. However, there is recognition that neighbourhood noise is generally becoming louder. The local newspaper has run educative pieces around the issue of noise.'(Young)

"During this reporting period it appears that no noise abatement measures were implemented or noise monitoring undertaken by the Council" (Cootamundra).

Future Reporting

The lessons learned from state of environment reporting are particularly relevant, with proposed legislative changes to environment reporting at a NSW State level from 2010 onwards. New reporting systems provides an opportunity to review current monitoring and data sets and develop systems for a more effective, relevant and integrated sustainability reporting system to assist decision makers in the challenging times ahead.

The ACR has the ability to be a strong leader in sustainability and key to this is developing a clear picture of the state of the region's environment and working in an integrated way to move ahead.