

Examining the future task of Victoria's Environment Protection Authority

Submission to Ministerial Inquiry into the EPA August 2015

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Introduction:

I am an Environmental Health Officer with close to 30 years' experience in the profession working for regional and rural Councils where the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and its Act have an influence on the way we do our work.

I am currently employed by the Pyrenees Shire and whilst I have their blessing to make this submission it must be emphasised that it is not a council submission and may not reflect their views.

The areas where the EPA impacts on my work are as follows;

The regulation of domestic waste water,

The control of litter, and

Environmental pollution especially noise, rubbish dumping and accidents such as spills from industry and motor vehicle accidents.

Background:

The Environment Protection Authority was established in 1971 and was a great organisation providing support to other authorities as well as responding to pollution incidents on behalf of the community and being a regulator in its own right.

As it developed it tackled major environmental issues as well as providing support to Local Government and developing policies and protocols for everyone's benefit.

Perhaps the EPA was too successful as successive governments over the years have slowly restricted its activities by reducing the budget and increasing the workload until now the resources of the authority are so stretched it is unable to provide any of the assistance it previously did.

The EPA has kept reinventing itself to enable to shift responsibility onto Local Government but has not provided the necessary tools for us to take on the additional workload let alone a revenue stream to pay for it.

If this process of cost shifting is to continue then the power to carry out the enforcement must also come to us as well as a revenue stream to finance it.

The Environmental Protection Authority in the future:

Three questions were put to the public consultations held around the State including Ballarat, which I attended.

1. What are the key environmental challenges over the next 20 years and which are most important in our region?

2. What should be the role of the EPA in the future?
3. Given the future challenges, what should be the relationship between the EPA and the community, industry, local government, other areas of state government and any other relationships of importance?

Response:

The issues affecting our region and our communities are no doubt similar to everywhere else in Victoria but we have some that are probably of greater significance than elsewhere.

The Pyrenees Shire is largely an agricultural area which is going to be adversely affected by global warming and climate change.

The shire is also home to a number of wind farm projects and more are proposed.

There will no doubt be interest in other sustainable energy projects as the technology develops and they become more economically viable.

Change will bring problems and we are currently having to deal with issues relating to wind turbines without having the expertise or the equipment to monitor the operations.

A suitably resourced EPA is the logical authority to provide this kind of monitoring across the state as well as being able to conduct research on the impacts of these types of industries on the environment and on the human population.

Is it any different for the EPA to monitor emissions from industries including coal fired power stations, and monitoring infrasound emissions from wind farms?

The EPA should be resourced also to provide expertise and oversight of any number of environmental issues that impact on the life of various communities across our state.

One area the EPA is considering stepping away from is the regulation of domestic wastewater systems.

If they continue down this path the responsibility already on local government will be increased without recourse to any authority to provide either advice or regulatory support.

The EPA must retain the role of approval authority for the various types of domestic wastewater systems that can be installed in Victoria.

A wastewater system in the Pyrenees Shire is as much a potential problem to us as one installed in any other part of the state and therefore should be assessed on a statewide basis by a single approval authority as has been the case since the EPA took over the control of domestic wastewater systems from the state health department.

These are just two areas that will become increasingly important as our state warms up and dries out.

The pressures on our water supplies will increase and there will be increasing pressures regionally as the urban fringe spreads with population growth and we are forced to look at new sources of water that may not have the level of protection currently enjoyed by our current sources.

Without the EPA as a lead player in this area there is a danger that under resourced communities will become second class citizens subject to environmental dangers that the local councils are unable to respond to.

The EPA should remain the lead authority and the experts for all aspects of their act.

The burden of environmental regulation is shared across a number of authorities but the regulatory role is probably concentrated with the EPA and Local Government.

The balance has been shifting as the EPA has experienced budget cuts even though there has not been any legislative change to support this.

If there is to be a reliance in the future by the EPA on Local Government as a first responder and/or investigator of environmental matters then the Environment Protection Act needs to be reflected to reflect this.

The powers now enjoyed by EPA officers must be given to local government Environmental Health Officers.

In addition there should also be a system of seconding of EHOs to the EPA on an ad hoc basis to undertake investigations for the EPA.

This would require that EHOs are seconded at the request of the EPA to undertake an investigation and from that time would be on the EPA payroll and be officers of the authority whilst undertaking that work.

At the conclusion of their role the EHOs would revert to their normal council duties.

This would enable prompt attendance at incidents which would not only minimise any environmental damage but greatly enhance the ability to identify the parties involved and undertake appropriate enforcement action.

This is a win for the EPA, a win for the Environment, a win for the Council and a win for the community.

The only party to miss out would be the polluter who would be held accountable for their actions.