

How Far Down the Sustainability Road has the Government Gone?

This paper examines the main aspects or key pivotal parts of the Government's Sustainability Strategy. It is not meant to be a complete or comprehensive assessment of the Government's progress on sustainability. Rather, it can be used as a starting point for further investigation of the WA Government's Sustainability Strategy. The strategy contains four process principles and many action plan items.

Sustainability Strategy Process Principles

Of the four principles three require comment.

Integrating the triple-bottom-line

This has been carried out in a meaningful way only during the Freight Network Review public process. This was partly due to the very public process of the Review and constant pressure from community groups to ensure proper weighting and attention to sustainability assessment factors.

Since then, while government documents constantly refer to triple-bottom-line analysis, the actual analyses fall far short of the standard set during the Freight Network Review. The assessment factors are usually limited, the weighting given to each factor do not stand scrutiny and the triple bottom line analysis itself is less than rigorous. Part of this is due to departments running the process and analysis and the limited or non-existent public involvement in it.

Accountability, Transparency and Engagement

The Government has conducted many public forums on a range of issues. However, public engagement does not end with a forum. The public needs to see that their input is reflected in outcomes. The results have been patchy.

(An example is the Dialogue with the City process. Community Committee members have fought a constant battle with departments to keep pro-active environmental, social and economic issues an essential and meaningful part of the Dialogue process.)

Workshops, citizen/community juries and forums can be very effective if the community is engaged in the running of them. All too often community members are passive recipients of information from government advisers, bureaucrats or Ministers. Debate and the range and depth of discussion are also controlled in the workshops.

The tendency to expect participants of these government forums to formulate firm ideas and 'vote' on the merits, or otherwise, of complex

government proposals after 4 or 5 hours of intensive lobbying is flawed.

While some departments have improved access to information other departments continue to withhold important public information.

The government's policy of departmental corporatisation has also limited departmental transparency and access to information which once was considered public.

Precaution

The precautionary principle is mentioned in most government documents but it remains to become a key tool in the decision-making process. Even the EPA and DoE fail to enact this principle. These departments and the Government promote 'risk management' rather than the precautionary 'risk avoidance'.

Sustainability Actions

Two key global actions mentioned in the Strategy are the development of a Greenhouse Strategy and the introduction of a Biodiversity Conservation Act.

The Biodiversity Conservation Act has not been introduced.

A Greenhouse Strategy was produced but was based on a 'business as usual' scenario with WA continuing to produce high per capita greenhouse emissions. The State Government was also reluctant to promote the signing of the Kyoto Protocol for greenhouse gas reduction.

The Greenhouse Strategy promotes carbon sequestration despite evidence that it is not a long-term solution and questions about the cost-effectiveness of sequestration and whether it is greenhouse gas neutral. Carbon sequestration is promoted above programs to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and for improvements to energy efficiency.

With a number of large greenhouse gas producing projects being pushed by the State Government, HiSmelt Steel, desalination plant, Alcoa expansions and a coal-fired power station, WA will become the highest per capita generator of greenhouse gases.

The Government's Sustainability Action Plan contains many useful items. This part looks at where some of the most important initiatives and key programs of the Action Plan are in light of current information.

1. Undertake sustainability assessment on complex or strategic projects selected by Cabinet.

Assessments should be on all major projects, not left up to Cabinet to decide.

No comprehensive sustainability assessment has been carried out on any project so far.

2. Establish a Sustainability Act.

Not done.

3. Sustainable Purchasing Policy

The State Supply Commission has developed a policy but qualifications exist in the policy, eg ensuring 'value for money' on purchases and 'level of effort expended to minimise the environmental impact of procurement should be commensurate with the level of purchase'. These exemptions allow a great deal of discretion on sustainability purchasing. As a result the use of 'environmentally-friendly' products by departments is not universal or extensive.

4. Implement the Transport Energy Strategy Committee report.

The TESC has completed its report but the Minister has yet to release it for public comment.

Some community members of this committee involved in sustainable transport felt it necessary to produce a minority report.

5. Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act 2003 has been enacted.

6. Establish Transparent Processes for Exploration, Mining and Mineral Processing.

The Government, via the Keating Review, has plans to restrict community groups rights to object to mining proposals through the Mining Wardens Court and also to end landowners' right to veto mining on their own land.

7. Work to Ensure Drinking Water Resources are Protected

The Government continues to allow inappropriate development above and around Perth's groundwater drinking resources.

8. Progress Protection for State Wetlands

A Swan Coastal Plain Wetland EPP is currently out for public comment.

One of the cornerstones of the EPA's Environmental Protection of Wetlands Position Paper is 'no net loss of wetland values and functions'. Government adoption of this policy has not occurred as Government projects have targeted conservation wetlands.

Promise to undertake a detailed audit of all Western Australian wetlands not completed.

9. Continue to Nominate Wetlands for Ramsar Convention.

A number of wetlands are 'under consideration' for nomination. The government is waiting on 'further advice' on whether to progress them.

10. Increase the Number of National Parks and Marine Reserves

Legislation to create a number of new national parks and extend others is currently before Parliament (tabled on June 24, 2004).

11. Develop a State Coastal Strategy

Done.

However, the Strategy has a number of exemptions one of which permits certain types of housing to encroach on the 100 metre coastal setback limit. The strategy also lacks realistic sea-level rise or increased storm and intensity buffers.

12. Sustainable Rangelands Management

Progress made. Concern expressed about conservation management of land where pastoral leases have not been renewed.

13. Develop an Urban Growth Boundary for Perth.

Consideration given to improving urban consolidation and slowing urban sprawl. However, the policy is based on 'business as usual' growth within the already substantial metropolitan region boundary. Little consideration is given to resource availability/depletion with the predicted population of 2.2 million

Dialogue with the City public forums have promoted urban sustainability and limits to growth issues but departments are slow to recognise and prioritise these community concerns.

14. Extend Bush Forever to Peel and Bunbury Regions.

Bush Forever policy for the metropolitan region recently released (August 2004) for public comment.

Government acknowledges that Bush Forever listing does not preclude 'development' of Bush Forever sites.

15. Extend TravelSmart

TravelSmart program has been extended but the Government promise to reach 600 000 residents by 2010 will not be achieved due to lack of funding. The Government predicts that under current funding arrangements only about 340 000 residents will receive TravelSmart by 2010.

16. Improve Public Transport

Large investments and expansion in heavy passenger rail.

Bus transit suffers from lack of funding and planning. Light rail options largely ignored.

Improvements to public transport compromised by the governments large spending on the expansion of the highway system (Tonkin and Roe Highways and Kwinana Freeway) and on increasing the capacity of existing roads.

17. Review Metropolitan Transport Strategy

Transport reviews have occurred but the MTS has not been overhauled since 1995. Unambitious targets set for increases in use of public transport and other transport alternatives and ad hoc application of Freight Network Review process. Sustainability issues considered in these reviews limited.

18. Enable Transport Funding for Integrated Planning

One of the biggest impediments to achieving this is the Government's failure to honour an election promise to end separate funding to Main Roads WA and instead create a single Transport Budget from which transport funding could be made on merit.

Main Roads WA continues to receive the vast majority of transport funding and exerts a disproportionate influence on transport planning.

19. Increase Freight onto Rail

Programs in place to improve rail's proportion of freight movement to and from the Fremantle Port. Interim figures indicate they are working.

While rail has won some contracts from road freight, institutional impediments to improving the rail freight task, eg lack of competitive neutrality, has resulted in the loss of some rail contracts to road.

20. Strategic Framework for Waste Management

While the Government has indicated it wants to phase out landfill sites on the Swan Coastal Plain this is being subverted by the practice of allowing the expansion of existing landfill sites.

Resource Recovery and Waste Avoidance Bill not enacted.

Contaminated Sites Act enacted but regulations essential to the proper working of the Act have not been proclaimed.

Establishment of mandatory hazardous waste targets for industry not carried out.

No policies to ensure hazardous or problematic wastes are phased out by 2020.

The non-government Core Consultative Committee on Waste has developed criteria for hazardous waste treatment technologies and siting criteria. Cabinet has endorsed these.

Strengthening of the Nuclear Waste Legislation to Prohibit Establishment of Nuclear Waste Facility has been done.

21. Implement State Water Strategy

Has been developed but it only contains guidelines.

The State Water Strategy appears to have taken the place of the Water Conservation Strategy. The Water Conservation Strategy was aimed at prioritising ways to reduce use of water and the conservation of water resources. The Water Strategy focuses on protection and management of water as a market resource with little consideration of intrinsic and environmental values.

22. Develop a Renewable Energy Strategy

Not done.

While the Government has some incentives for renewable energy its main energy focus is the building of a coal-fired power station at Collie as the future power supply for the State.

The inclusion of 'waste to energy' plants as 'renewable energy' is a distraction from the promotion of energy efficiency and solar and wind alternatives. It also diverts attention from reducing the generation of waste.



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