

EPA SUBMISSION – Jo McCubbin

I have had dealings with the EPA over the last 15 years.

Some interactions have been exceptionally good and some encounters less satisfactory.

There seemed to have been more staff in the field, 15 years ago, than is now the case. It used to be possible to ring the local office and talk to dedicated local staff, who knew the region. It has since become, at times, bordering on farcical, if you attempt to ring for information, this is all done through Melbourne with a call back from your local office promised. On one occasion, I asked for information regarding a Works Approval (WA). My call was not returned and when I rang to follow it up, it was agreed that I had rung up previously..... about an issue in Western Australia! (It became apparent why I might not have had a call back!)

On another occasion I requested air quality monitoring for a peat fire in Longford. I received a call back from my local office some weeks later, and they appeared to be unaware of this problem in their patch. This despite my having called the 24 hour emergency hotline in the first week of the peat fire. (I called on a Saturday and discovered that there was no staffing until 8.30 am). Later that morning they advised I try the CFA or the local council...but it would seem that nobody thought to tell the local EPA office. Surely an e mail, to the local office, generated at the time of the phone call, would have been sensible!

- **There needs to be a dedicated LOCAL phone and online contact. With ONLY weekend response, done through Melbourne, and e mail documentation of the interaction, made visible from all offices.**

The EPA did a good job of community consultation in the early “noughties” with such initiatives as Neighbourhood Improvement Plans and originally, provided good S20B conferences that really listened and were responsive to community concerns. A more recent local example, concerning the Esso conditioning plant in early 2013, was called at short notice, hosted at Longford Hall and did not allow discussion of such key issues as climate change. **For a plant seeking to emit one million tonnes of CO2 per annum, this was a travesty.**

Government policy seems to have impacted on the ability to talk about Climate Change. It appears that all references were removed from EPA annual reporting when the Baillieu/Naphthine Government assumed power. This may explain why this all important topic was not allowed to be discussed at the S20B meeting.

This is a ridiculous situation, if the EPA is so hamstrung by the ideology of the incumbent government.

- **The EPA needs to be truly independent of Government, able to give advice fearlessly, and not forced to change its processes with every change of Government.**

Ideally the EPA must become a truly INDEPENDENT EPA which reports annually to Government. The US EPA has an elected board. Perhaps something similar should be considered here.

In the future, the EPA needs to be a strong protector of the Environment, responsive to an economy transitioning away from fossil fuels. New industries such as nano technology or biomedical technologies, etc. will throw up new and different environmental concerns. Climate Change will make some environmental disasters more common.

- **The EPA needs to be structured in such a way as to grow with the new.**

Ideally the EPA needs to be strengthened with more field staff, as a visible local face in our communities. It will need more teeth to deal with poor performance, and to be seen to do so. It will also need to have new ways of dealing with different industries.

It will definitely need to have a much wider and more diverse monitoring network. Air quality is arguably worse in rural areas where forest burning, both controlled and natural, as well as wood fired heating, lead to truly appalling air quality for significant periods. All such air and water monitoring needs to be publically available on the internet, in real time and in user friendly fashions...such as is routinely available with the Bureau of Meteorology Website.

However, the current colour coded AQ rating, on the EPA website, is a good visual way to see the data, though it has become so big that it is clunky to use, with Gippsland stations having to be scrolled down, to be seen on the screen, but all the buttons you might wish to click, and the column headings, are then lost to sight, while the lower area of the screen is viewed. Perhaps we need separate regional (Gippsland, western Vic etc) screens to facilitate ease of use.

- **All of this requires substantially increased funding to make it happen. This is essential to a properly functioning Environmental watchdog.**

I believe that the EPA needs to be promoted in the Hierarchy of ministerial importance. Historically, the EPA is the Johnny-come-lately of Government Authorities. Water, Mining and Health etc. have long been important but they should, in the 21st century, all be subordinate to the EPA.

During the Morwell Mine fire, the EPA were concerned about information being supplied to Health and slow responses as the information was processed through two bureaucracies. This needs to be stream lined and the EPA should employ public health experts, of its own, who can speak out, in emergency situations. Obviously there needs to be an all of government process but EPA should lead and coordinate many of these Departments.

- **Mining and Petroleum industries need to be brought under EPA to ensure protection of environmental standards and community wellbeing.**

Of particular concern is Mining. The processes (which no doubt have evolved since Eureka Stockade), really need to be done again from scratch! This could well be a restructure driven by moving under EPA and forcing adoption of community inspired consultation and oversight. As the advent of an unconventional gas industry, has highlighted, there is practically no tradition of community consultation. Unlike other projects, mining seems rather protected from having to engage with local people, such as with Works Approvals and EES which provide for community input at various stages. It seems crazy that a potentially damaging mining or petroleum project somehow lies, largely, outside of EPA remit. It should start with environmental assessment and community consultation instead of such processes becoming an inconvenience at the end of expensive process leading to permits and licences.

- **Mining should definitely be brought under the EPA umbrella and subjected to identical processes to those required from other industries.**

To truly protect, the EPA needs to monitor pollution, everywhere, not just in urban areas. Tasmania has more air quality monitoring than Victoria, nearly all of it in small rural towns. NSW has AQ monitoring all along the Hunter Valley, after complaints from the community. With summer bush fires, autumn and spring controlled burns and winter wood heater use, small urban centres in Gippsland, can easily have substandard air quality, through most of the year, whenever weather conditions are conducive.

This will likely get worse as climate change increases the risk of bush fires. Gippsland has had 3 mega fires this century, and experienced darkness (from massive smoke plumes) in the middle of the day, on two occasions. We have a backbone of bush, which unfortunately burns extraordinarily well, frequently enveloping surrounding areas in eucalyptus smoke. In addition, many homes depend on stinking wood heaters, which may have significant emissions of fine particles unless used in the stringent fashion, the manufacturers utilise to get within emission standards. This is not such a problem for isolated rural homes but a big problem for neighbours in urban centres. The health effects of very fine particles (PM_{2.5}) are well known and research is beginning to show increasing health risks, such as foetal shrinkage and longterm brain impacts, as well as more obvious lung and heart damage.

- **Gippsland is a special case with so much native forest, which burns, releasing PM_{2.5}. There needs to be AQ monitoring in Orbost, Bairnsdale and Sale, Rosedale, Yarram, Foster etc.**

Similarly with concern about mercury in fish, for example, there needs to be realtime , web-based water quality data. This is important for swimmers, fisher

folk and algal bloom information etc. It also, effectively names and shames polluters if there is a peak of nutrient from a point source upstream from a monitoring spot.

There is also room to expand citizen science, perhaps with a web based “unofficial” data page, which should be viewed as indicative only, but should be available to the public. An apparent citizen science, standards breach, should be investigated.

Similarly, soil quality in catchments is important.

- **Need for cumulative impacts not just stand alone**

When new industrial infrastructure is planned, the laws need to change, to allow the EPA to treat each application as part of a regional air or watershed, rather than as a stand alone point source. This should include assessment of the cumulative impacts of aquifer depletion, which may lead to subsidence or loss of access to falling water tables, at relatively distant places over a long time frame.

- **Improved media presence**

The EPA needs to have a much greater, proactive rather than reactive media presence. This might include registering to receive tweets, texts or e mails, notifying interested persons of news related to local pollution, new monitors, new members of local staff, new works approval etc.

Ideally the EPA needs to become a trusted, local presence, overtly protecting its local community. There needs to be a visible field presence with obviously marked cars, uniforms etc, to “sell” the local presence.

I would love to see other initiatives such a Environmental Health clinics, which might combine Occupational Health, Toxicology service and research and analysis arms. It may work to combine Work Cover and EPA. As an example, EPA could process hair samples for people who believe they may have had exposures. This is currently not covered by Medicare since it is assumed that all toxic exposures will be through work, and hence covered by WorkCover. Toxins also affect women and children who may not be part of a work force!

- **In the US such centres, dedicated to Children’s Environmental Health, have an educative role, for health care workers and the community as well as an investigative capacity.**

Originally, Industry were assigned EPA officers, dedicated to their industry, who were their go-to person to help them through the regulatory processes and advise on waste minimisation etc. The problem with this idea is that such closeness may give rise to significant conflict of interest. The media investigation into the Birregurra gravel quarry, highlights the help from the Departments, explaining how to get around the regulations – *“State public servants, including those from the mining regulator, (Earth Resources Regulator, ERR) have in effect coached a big mining company (MCG) in how to deceive the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal in a case involving a David and Goliath battle between the company and farmers”*

This will always be a potential problem but could be minimised by using the other departments, instead of the EPA, to guide applicants through the processes, keeping EPA at arms length. EPA should contract its own, independent, experts, from different industries, to advise EPA as to where it needs to scrutinize most closely, where pollution risks are greatest, and what standards are feasible for a company of the size in question. EPA staff, should at all times take the role of guardian of the environment and community health, not the industry’s best mate.

- **They need to truly PROTECT the environment rather than being seen as the Pollution Permitter.**

Jo McCubbin

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