

John Cumming's submission - the Inquiry into the EPA

1. Key environmental challenges in the future

- Global Warming in the long term with the accumulation of community wastes both as municipal waste and accumulation of toxic materials in homes and workplaces.
- Loss of biodiversity from reduction in available animal habitats.
- Land contamination is not a large issue (and yet occupies a large proportion of EPA resources)
- Sea pollution due to our activities especially the use of increasingly wide variety of chemical products (nutrients/ suspended solids/ micro plastics....).

2. Community expectations will depend on a number of factors, but at present it is that the EPA is responsible for maintaining systems that protect our environment external to our homes and workplaces. The EPA is responsible to inform the community of the state of the environment, but not to act as an emergency response coordinating organisation.

3. I think these requirements are fair and should be maintained into the future. However, there seems to be a short term focus on environmental justice especially in the terms of reference. We may have to bear some pain for long term goals of environmental protection.

4. The EPA needs to maintain sufficient expertise to be able to monitor the state of the environment and to warn the community about issues that may impact their uses of the environment in the short and long term. The EPA should be a community leader with a strong public voice that is independent of political situation. At the present time the EPA is completely passive on most environmental issues. The conflict of human activities with environmental impacts is not the concern of the EPA. It should be an advocate for the environment, not an organisation that attempts to balance impacts against business financial benefits. At present the EPA has its hands tied in this balance forced on them. They have produced clear standards for environmental protection and these need to be enforced.

5. The EPA currently has insufficient ability to monitor the environment and outcomes of business activities. This has led to weaker enforcement of standards and poorer outcomes for the community. It is primarily through government interference with EPA activities especially in the encouragement of better environmental care by industry and the lack of development of performance standards for consumer products have left Australia in a bad position to protect the environment. This is demonstrated by the import of building products that contain asbestos, consumer products with toxic dyes and the continuing use of products containing long lived perfluorinated pollutants.

6. It appears to me that the EPA has been defunded so that its staffing levels have dropped over the last decade. It has necessarily become more bureaucratic focussing on project management rather than expensive science. It has developed external experts in auditors and specific issue specialists to consult to it. This should be the function of the organisation and it should be telling the community how to fix problems not establishing tribunals. This lack of technical expertise is probably evident through the EPA and may also be critical at the top of the organisation.

The EPA has appointed 50 odd external environmental auditors who undertake environmental checks on the condition of land that may have been contaminated. To my limited knowledge there has not been a single audit of an industrial activity or consumer product that may be currently polluting the environment this year. Pollution prevention is much more advantageous to the environment than trying fixing up problems of the past. Often this means moving contaminated materials from one place to another.

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7. My main issue with EPA functioning is that it is concentrating on minor problems with historical pollution events now while our planet and particularly our state are facing huge environmental issues due to our current activities. Why is the EPA not telling us how things are in relation to Global Warming, our impacts on other life forms in our particular environmental segments and what we need to do now to be more sustainable?

There is a gaping gap in leadership from the EPA on environmental issues, especially the big ones and it appears to be due to political interference, short term thinking and a lack of resolve by EPA management to face these issues and galvanise action to protect the environment – which after all is the name of the organisation!

I believe that the EPA should be re-established as a statutory organisation with autonomy from the government in power so that it can defend environmental standards without conflict with community activities that impact the environment. It should be empowered to gain knowledge and to use it for the benefit of the environment and the community.

EPA funding should be established at an escalating level that allows the organisation to meet its goals and it should be judged on its performance in protecting the environment, mainly by preventing pollution and meeting the standards set for air, water and land quality. The community needs to be provided with this information so that they can judge this performance and see where their money is being spent.