

**Enviro'14 Conference**

**Adelaide Convention Centre**

**Friday - 19 September 2014**

**9:05am - 9:35am**

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to attend this very important event.

I am here in my capacity as President of the Australian Local Government Association or ALGA. ALGA represents the interests of local government at a national level. It is a federated body of state and territory local government associations. Through that membership ALGA represents the interests of around 560 local government authorities across Australia.

I am also here however, as Mayor of Marion here in Adelaide and in that role, I have a strong appreciation of the needs of local communities when it comes to dealing with crucial matters of infrastructure, environmental and resource management not the least of which is the continued provision of water, an issue of considerable importance as we head into the summer months and potentially face an El Niño.

I have chosen to talk about the issue of innovation. I chose it for a number of reasons.

First: it is a topic that local government is very familiar with. Councils are early adopters, the ones willing to take the risk to embrace new and emerging technologies and practices.

Secondly, I believe that it is incumbent on every one of us, in business, in government, or in government enterprises and certainly

in public life, to continue to innovate, or at the very least continue to examine new ways of doing things. We cannot stand still in life or in business. Indeed I strongly believe in the statement that John F Kennedy once famously made, "change is a law of life and those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."

Innovation is the means by which we save time and money. It gives us competitive advantage. It helps us grow, improves our productivity and performance. In short, it helps us meet the needs of our customers or community.

When I was asked to participate in this event I thought carefully about the value of my presence and whether I could do justice to such a broad topic. Local government is not an industry. We don't have the benefit of a pure and relatively narrow commercial focus. Many councils not only provide services to their communities but they also try to influence the management of resources and environmental practices through their land use planning and urban design roles.

ALGA, as the national peak body for local government also engages in inter-governmental discussions through formal channels such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as well informal ones across a wide range of issues of national interest. Many of those issues are of concern to those of us in the room today. They present considerable challenges but also opportunities and I believe many of those opportunities are based in understanding and embracing innovation.

Local government's interests are therefore very broad. Those interests also differ between councils in different states. We live in a Federation and the role of councils in different states and within states varies, it is an issue that is now very much at the forefront. A one-size fits all approach just does not work for local government across the range of issues it deals with, and certainly a one size fits all

approach does not work for councils in tackling a range of environmental issues.

Now some may see this variation as a weakness but in fact it reflects the primary strength of local government – the fact that councils can reflect local priorities and local needs and take account of the local environment.

Having said that, I now want to just dwell for just a minute on the importance of intergovernmental collaboration on environmental policy. Whatever local government does whether it be on environmental protection or in environmental management, including biodiversity or coastal protection, local government operates within state and federal policy frameworks.

From an ALGA perspective it is regrettable that there is no longer an effective ministerial forum, involving with all levels of government including local government, to deal specifically with environment policy matters. For several decades the COAG Standing Council for Environment and Water, and before it, the Australian and New Zealand Environment Council and predecessor council was an effective forum for Ministers and the President of ALGA to consider matters of national importance and work collaboratively on policy alignment and sometime joint funding initiatives that were beyond the financial capacity of an individual jurisdiction. I don't want to single out any one program but what I am thinking of here are programs such as the National Water Initiative, the National Weeds Strategy, and even the national waste policy.

As we are gathered here in Adelaide, we cannot ignore what is the environmental elephant in the room, the Murray River. Although those of us in South Australia may be closer to the river on a daily-basis, the health and long-term viability of the river is a matter of national importance. The basin the river feeds is Australia's food-

bowl and therefore what happens to this river system will impact the whole country in environmental, social and economic terms.

The fate of the Murray-Darling often gets lost in political wrangling. But as far as I'm concerned, it is far too important and requires the attention of all us gathered here today; policy makers, researchers and practitioners. We all need to commit to using best evidence and real innovation to help the basin into the future.

This highlights the point, , intergovernmental collaboration - particularly policy alignment (at a landscape scale) and funding are absolutely critical to successful environment outcomes. So I say this. It is, from my point of view, important that governments at all levels innovate and think about new ways of collaborating on environmental issues. I have said we no longer have a specific Ministerial Council on Environment, but I have also said that intergovernmental collaboration is critical. So my challenge to governments at all levels is to develop new ways - effective ways to work together to align policy and funding for the benefit of the environment and local communities. It might be through multi-lateral agreements including local government. It might be better and clearer delegations and financial transfers. But I suspect that it will always require dialogue between Ministers and between officials.

**The three areas I am going to focus on today are; water management, waste resources and clean energy and how they link to broader national benefits.**

The relationship between water services, local government and the communities they serve is a complex one. There is no one story that best represents how councils work to ensure that water continues to flow and how local government plays its role in the greater national initiatives related to water. For example, some councils only handle storm water management, whereas others in such as Queensland

and some regional areas in New South Wales can often be the water supplier. And to make things even more complex local government's role changes from time to time, for example until recently, all of Tasmania's water was managed by councils.

In fact, the vast range of issues that councils deal with in water resource management, is demonstrated every year at the National General Assembly of Local Government which is an annual conference of more than 800 local government representatives which consider important policy issues and debates motions put by delegates. I'd like to give you examples of the water issues raised by councils over the past few years at the Assembly.

The Central Goldfields Shire in Victoria raised the issue of the hundreds of small towns which are not connected to reticulated sewerage systems and the fact that small and regional communities require assistance to fund the development and maintenance of sewerage. Without the availability of reticulated sewerage population growth and viability of small towns are limited.

Isaac Regional Council Queensland called for the Commonwealth to work with state governments to develop sustainable water strategies for regional Australia that can support growth of industry and communities and assists local governments experiencing water security and reliability concerns.

North Burnett Regional Council in Queensland called on the Commonwealth Government to expand current flood mitigation programs to include alternatives to flood levees in order to increase the resilience of communities which suffer regular disaster events - as those communities without flood levees must pay much higher insurance premiums. And the Brisbane City Council in Queensland also raised flood risk management and called on the Commonwealth and State Governments to work together to develop a nationally consistent framework for flood risk management. Gosford City

Council in NSW sought the introduction of legislation which places a value on water, reflective of the environmental and social sustainability issues incurred in water extraction.

I hope these examples give you some idea of the breadth of local government involvement and interest in water management issues. But it also speaks to the innovation we already see underway across the nation. Now, innovation need not be based on expensive technology. It can be based on unique approaches and creativity.

One thing we see in local government in a number of fields is increased collaboration. Issues of delicate resource and environmental management often cross council boundaries; they share waterways as well as land.

An example of this increased collaboration is a home grown, South Australia initiative, the 'Resilient South' initiative. Some of you may have heard of this. This is a collection of four connected coastal councils, Onkaparinga, Holdfast Bay, Mitcham and my own council of Marion. This program recognises the realities of the consequences of climate change. Climate change does not respect borders and so the more we do to address those mutual challenges, the better placed we all will be.

This initiative started last year and saw a number of events as well as councils sharing knowledge and resources, with the intention of delivering a comprehensive plan to deal with adaptation needs across the region. I was very pleased to see this adaptation plan released in July this year. It does deal with many elements you would expect in a plan of this kind such as mapping, biodiversity and water management. However, it also dealt with issues that address the impacts on the people who live in our communities, such as emergency management, assisting vulnerable people and how to assist local businesses. The plan is this comprehensive because the

impacts of climate change are wide-spread and will affect every part of our communities.

Another example is the Cooks River Alliance that was launched in September 2011 by eight councils in the Cooks River Catchment in and around inner-western Sydney – Ashfield, Bankstown, Canterbury, City of Sydney, Hurstville, Marrickville, Strathfield and Rockdale to address the complex problems of the Cooks River in the long term, whilst maximising the efficient use of member councils' limited resources.

The Alliance will help councils achieve sustainable urban water management in the Cooks River Catchment through organisational capacity building, and partnership building with other councils, government agencies, community organisations and local people.

This project builds on existing community partnerships, and combines environmental interpretation with traditional knowledge and culture. A place-based water sensitive homes program is designed to change household behaviour.

Under the Australian Constitution management of water is vested with state and territory governments. However, as water resources often cut across jurisdictional boundaries, cooperation between all governments on water governance arrangements is essential.

**Even those who are not familiar with local government will have heard of the 'three r's' – Roads, Rates and Rubbish.** While the work that local government undertakes is a lot more complex than it was back when that phrase was first coined, it still reflects the fundamental responsibilities of local government.

Therefore it should not be surprising that one area where local government undertakes considerable innovation is in waste

management. A lot of innovation is about responding to new challenges, as well as responding to existing ones in a better way.

One of the emerging issues councils are managing now is that of e-waste, that being, the waste derived from our increasing reliance on electronic gadgets and appliances. One of the first times that councils needed to deal with the consequences from that reliance was during the 1980s and 1990s. It was at this time that the risks of chloro-fluro-carbons, or CFCs, in fridges were first recognised as being significant, both for people and the environment, in general. Councils had to develop techniques to safely handle appliances.

Now, it is necessary to determine how to deal with the components of mobile phones, tablets, laptops and televisions. This is even more pressing considering the speed with which new models are released and replace the old.

The issue is that these devices contain many elements that are dangerous to people and the environment. These include heavy metals like cadmium, lead and mercury and chemicals like bromides. Councils are now working with waste companies as well as scientific and technical experts to determine standards of how you deal with the real risks of handling, dismantling and processing this waste.

But it is not all about the risks and challenges. It is also about the opportunities. Councils have been working together, and with external companies, to put the other components to good use. These gadgets also contain metals like lithium, gold, silver and platinum that can be extracted and sold off. They also provide the opportunity to recycle the casings made of plastic, aluminium, ceramics and glass.

**The final issue I would like to touch on is that of the importance of innovation in delivering high-quality environmental outcomes.** As you will all be aware, many sectors had to deal with the regulatory and practical implications of the former Government's decision to

put a price on carbon. This did cause some concerns in local government. We are now, however, managing the dismantling of that carbon pricing regime and the transition to the new Government's 'direct action' system.

ALGA, on behalf of local government has been engaged in discussions with the Government to assist councils in undertaking as smooth a transition as possible, but also one that enables local government to take advantage of new opportunities.

In its submissions to the Federal Government, ALGA highlighted a number of concerns the sector had about the planned Emissions Reduction Fund or ERF. One of the key concerns raised was that unlike the Carbon Farming Initiative under the previous Government, still a far from perfect program, there was support direct or indirect, for those who were early-adopters of technologies. These included carbon capture or capture and flare for methane in landfills, capture and generate, among others.

The new program risks rewarding those who are currently heavy emitters, at the expense of those who are already efficient. Local government sees this as a perverse outcome. Innovation might not always be initially the cheapest option, but many sectors, including local government show that adopting new technologies early will benefit all those who come online later. ALGA will continue to advocate to Government and industry, the need to encourage innovation. Let me wrap up quickly with some comments about clean energy and more broadly climate change policy.

The impacts of climate change are not limited to the boundaries of councils and the effects cannot be addressed by any one single council. A broader approach involving state and national governments is needed.

ALGA has a strong national position on the need to address climate change. We strongly support the need for abatement and emissions reduction as well as adaptation. As previously mentioned local government does not operate in isolation. It operates within a framework of state and federal policy.

As we all know the Australian Government has adopted 'Direct Action' as its primary policy response to address climate change. A key part of this policy is the Emissions Reduction Fund. This is an important initiative, and ALGA looks forward to the full details of the fund and how it will operate.

ALGA has called for the inclusion of an energy-efficiency program into the new Federal Government's climate change policy. Councils have seen the value of embracing the opportunity to innovate and to improve practices. Recently, councils have retrofitted their offices with energy-efficient lighting, better insulation and air-conditioning.

An example of this effort comes, again, from here in South Australia. For a number of years, the Local Government Association of South Australia managed a program called Solar Councils Innovation Fund. This was a partnership between LGASA and the solar industry to assist councils to put in place solar power infrastructure. The projects that were approved over the life of program included the installation of solar panels on council chambers to systems that use solar to support street-lighting.

This initiative and others have provided opportunities to reduce running-costs but also to reduce carbon emissions from electricity, the single-biggest emitter. But also speak to the appetite and experience of local government to create relationships and get results.

And just before I finish, this week, the Climate Council released a new report highlighting the potential impact future sea level rises may have on Australian infrastructure.

The Report *Counting the Costs: Climate Change and Coastal Flooding* warns that there will be huge losses if action is not taken to protect against rising sea levels and extreme weather events.

Perhaps this report may provide an impetus to kickstart a new focus between all levels of government to address this and other environmental policy issues.

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude by noting that while the challenges we face are wide-ranging and significant, so are the opportunities. I believe that one path to get a grip on those opportunities, is to seek out and embrace innovation. I have spoken about a range of examples in the local government sphere that demonstrate the work being undertaken.

Innovation takes many forms. Like local government, there is no one-size fits all approach. It is councils working together, recognising that they share the same waterway and an interest in making sure it's healthy. It is determining the best way to dispose of electronic appliances with dangerous components. It is also the real opportunity presented by energy-efficiency and how we need to take opportunities to support emerging technologies.

We know that local government's experience is valuable and expansive. We are, however, always mindful of issues that remain unsolved, these are often the most challenging. But I believe with the good will of all levels of government, we can begin to make positive change.

Thank you very much.