



THE HON GREG HUNT MP

Minister for the Environment

Working with local governments for a better environment

National General Assembly of Local Government

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CANBERRA

Introduction

Thank you for the introduction and good morning.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. I pay my respects to the Elders past, present and future and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attending today's event. I wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and contribution they make to the life of our country.

I was delighted to be invited to speak today because - as you have no doubt heard many times over the last few days - local government plays an important role in the Australian system of government.

As we move towards new challenges and integrate more with the global economy, our environment policy is central to improving environmental outcomes for all Australians.

The Australian Government's *Plan for a Cleaner Environment* rests on four key pillars - Clean Air, Clean Land, Clean Water and Heritage Protection.

The Australian Government is delivering on this plan but it requires the efforts of every level of government, especially local government, to succeed.

Whether it is recycling, waste management or land management and protection, local governments across Australia support and deliver on-the-ground programmes and activities that are critical for a cleaner environment for Australia.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your ongoing work and encourage and inspire you, hopefully, to do more.

The Australian way of life and our economic prosperity depend on a healthy environment.

Today I would like to touch on a number of areas critical for a healthy environment and look at what the Australian Government is doing and how we can work together to continue to achieve results.

Clean Air

Central to the success of our Clean Air policy is the implementation of the Emission Reduction Fund and progress towards our objective of a National Clean Air Agreement.

The Emission Reduction Fund

Since the National General Assembly last met in June 2014, the Government has had four major successes in its approach to reducing emissions.

- The carbon tax has been repealed.

- The Emissions Reduction Fund has been opened for business, with \$2.55 billion of funding available.
- A number of priority methods for Emissions Reduction Fund projects have been released, expanding opportunities across the economy.
- The first Emissions Reduction Fund auction has been held, with outstanding results.

The Emissions Reduction Fund allows us to take action that builds a healthier environment while also building a stronger economy.

It offers local government, business and community groups an incentive to adopt new technologies and work practices. This has the mutual benefit of improving productivity or energy efficiency, while at the same time reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Local governments are familiar with opportunities to reduce emissions, such as capturing gas from landfill or vegetation management activities. In fact, many of you have already taken advantage of these opportunities and are running projects.

The release of new methods under the Fund means local governments can take further action. Local governments could be eligible to receive funding for a range of projects, including improving building energy efficiency, capturing gas from domestic wastewater facilities and reducing emissions from public transport.

The Government is focused on developing more methods and new opportunities will be coming on line shortly.

I know councils have expressed interest in the commercial and public lighting method that's in development. Under this method, councils will be able to earn credits by upgrading public lighting such as pedestrian lights, street lights and traffic lights. I know my Department is working hard at developing this method for you.

But let's look at what you can do right now.

Energy Efficiency

Under the methods currently available, councils could replace old inefficient equipment with newer technology to improve the energy efficiency of their office buildings. For example, councils could upgrade window glazing or insulation or lighting. Another option could be to upgrade heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems.

Introducing improved energy management systems is another way councils could improve the energy efficiency of their office buildings.

Small-scale office upgrades could be brought together in an aggregated project allowing local councils or groups of local councils to reduce their power bills. It could also reduce reporting and auditing costs associated with running the project.

By working collaboratively, councils could reach the minimum bid size of 2,000 tonnes per year for the auction.

Transport

Under the Emissions Reduction Fund, councils are now eligible to reduce the emissions intensity of their vehicles by replacing vehicles, modifying existing vehicles, fuel switching, or improving operational or management practices.

this could be done by:

- training drivers of council vehicles to drive more efficiently in urban environments;
- renewing a light vehicle fleet with more efficient vehicles including hybrid or electric vehicles; or
- using alternative fuels such as LNG, LPG and biodiesel in vehicle fleets.

First auction

The first auction of the Emissions Reduction Fund was an overwhelming success. It was a great demonstration of how local government and business can turn emissions reduction efforts into reality.

Under the first auction, the Government awarded contracts for 47 million tonnes of emissions reductions and committed \$660 million to purchase these reductions from local government and business.

In fact, a couple of councils successfully secured contracts to deliver emissions reductions over the next seven years.

I know that many of you are considering projects. I encourage you to act early and register your projects now so we can build a healthier environment, as well as a stronger economy.

National Clean Air Agreement

I would like to turn my attention now to another initiative aimed at improving Australia's air quality. Around this time last year, I secured the support of Australia's Environment Ministers to work towards a National Clean Air Agreement by 1 July 2016 to ensure that the community continues to enjoy clean air into the future.

Australia's air quality is very good by world standards.

Over a number of years, Australian Governments have successfully implemented measures to reduce the levels of airborne pollutants. These have significantly improved Australia's air quality.

However, there are ongoing challenges and governments, businesses and the community need to be active to ensure a clean air future.

Particulate matter and ozone still exceed national ambient air quality standards in urban areas, and there are specific concerns for some local communities, such as sulphur dioxide emissions from nearby industrial activity.

Airborne pollutants impact human health - from mild asthma to more serious respiratory and/or cardiovascular diseases - and particulate matter is now known to be carcinogenic.

With our population growing, and energy and transport demands increasing, our future air quality is set to face further challenges.

On 26 February 2015, I met with State and Territory Environment Ministers and we initiated engagement with business, industry and community representatives to help inform the development of the National Clean Air Agreement.

I am pleased to say that there was strong interest with over 300 submissions received. This has confirmed the ongoing concern for Australia's air quality and support for action to be taken.

The National Clean Air Agreement is being developed as a means:

- to prioritise and focus actions to reduce air pollution and improve air quality, and
- to deliver the best approaches to tackling air pollution through promoting cooperative action between all levels of government and with industry and the community.

Next month, I will be meeting again with the Environment Ministers to consider the outcomes of recent public consultations and discuss moving forward on a range of air quality initiatives as part of finalising the National Clean Air Agreement.

We will be considering strengthening reporting standards for particulate matter - these are included in the National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality) Measure and are used by all states and territories.

We will also be discussing specific actions to reduce air pollution emissions from wood heaters and non-road spark ignition engines and equipment sources, such as brush cutters, leaf blowers and marine engines.

The Ministers will consider action to strengthen standards and reduce emissions in these sectors as they are significant sources of particle pollution emissions.

Clean Air Champions

To support action on clean air I have launched a Clean Air Champions initiative. This initiative is a partnership formed with the assistance of individuals and organisations and is

about raising awareness and increasing knowledge of air quality and its importance to the future of Australia.

Clean Air Champions may be ordinary people doing extraordinary things, championing innovative ideas, or leading research that will make a positive difference to the air we breathe.

I launched the initiative on 12 June and announced Mr Gary Fooks as the first Clean Air Champion. Gary is a keen fisherman who has devoted over a decade of his career working to reduce emissions from non-road spark ignition engines.

Today I am delighted to be able to announce Hyundai as another Clean Air Champion. I am sure you have seen Australia's first Fuel Electric Vehicle, the Hyundai ix35, parked in the foyer.

The ix35 is a pioneering step towards an emission free, hydrogen powered green transport solution for Australia. The only thing that comes out of the Hyundai ix35's exhaust pipe is water.

It is technologies such as this that could reduce our greenhouse gas emissions faster and further and support a clean air future.

Clean Land

The Australian Government is investing more than \$2 billion in managing our natural resources, helping local communities – including local government - to take practical action to improve their environment.

Our Clean Land policy centres on a range of initiatives including the Green Army, National Landcare and 20 Million Trees programmes. Another important element of this policy is waste and I want to focus particularly on e-waste recycling and the critical role of local governments and their partnership with industry.

Green Army

The Green Army launched just under 12 months ago and within that time I've announced more than 700 projects, with more than 280 already rolled out across Australia.

The Green Army is making a real difference to the environment and local communities. And it's working because Green Army projects are community based: projects are identified at the local level, guided by local community needs and support young Australians in your local area.

The Green Army is a genuine environmental success story that is having positive impacts on the community, the environment and on the lives of participants.

Projects are delivering impressive results not only for the local environment, but also for the young participants involved who are actively creating a pathway for their future.

Every day we're hearing positive stories from young people who are going on to find employment in environmental fields; community organisations who are applying for more projects after the success of their first projects; locals who are impressed by the enhanced environment in their communities; and team leaders who are proud to be providing a positive mentoring role to young people.

Local councils around the country have the lion's share of Green Army projects. The positive support shown at the local level has been fantastic. We have 102 local councils acting as project hosts for the Green Army involved in some 215 projects. And I expect those figures to rise substantially when we announce the Round 3 projects shortly.

Anecdotally we've heard projects are exceeding expectations. I spoke with the Queanbeyan City Council earlier this year and they mentioned they were apprehensive at first about applying for a Green Army project, yet the quality and efficiency of the Green Army team's work prompted them to apply for more projects.

A recent survey of project hosts showed over 90 per cent would like to be involved in the Green Army Programme again, with the vast majority agreeing that their Green Army project would result in the intended environmental or heritage outcomes.

Other project hosts have told us their project "surpassed our wildest dreams with the sheer amount of on-ground works achieved" or "the Green Army team exceeded the expectations and targets for the project. The landowners had given up completely on the privet infestation - they simply didn't have the resources to manage it."

I think that last point is crucial - particularly for those who question the resourcing behind hosting a Green Army team. Think about how the Green Army can help you with those environmental jobs you don't have the resources or a crew of people to undertake.

When you apply for a Green Army project, you'll receive a team of up to nine participants and a team supervisor. Here's a group of young Australians ready to carry out activities such as restoring and protecting habitat, weeding, planting, cleaning up creeks and rivers or protecting cultural or national heritage places.

The Programme covers all costs associated with the team and you can nominate for an average of \$10,000 per project for materials such as seedlings, herbicide, mulch, matting and tree guards to help deliver the project.

I encourage you to get involved – think about how the Green Army can help you. Get along to the information sessions held by my Department in the lead up to project applications rounds, or contact the Service Providers who deliver the Programme to discuss project options and see for yourselves how the Green Army can make a difference to your community.

National Landcare

In response to community feedback, we have redesigned funding for Landcare based on three key principles: simple, local and long-term.

National Resource Management (NRM) groups are now required to allocate a minimum of 20 per cent of their funding to small, on-ground projects delivered by Landcare and other community groups. This equates to \$90 million over four years that is now available for Landcare groups and others in the community to access for small projects.

20 Million Trees

An important part of the National Landcare Programme is our commitment to planting 20 Million Trees by 2020 to re-establish green corridors and forests in urban and regional Australia.

The 20 Million Trees Programme is providing \$50 million over four years to contribute to re-establishing native vegetation, providing habitat to support our threatened plants and animals, and creating greener spaces to improve the livability of our cities and towns.

Trees and other native plants will be planted on both public and private land, providing a range of community and environmental benefits.

The trees will help to re-establish green corridors across our landscapes and provide habitat for threatened species, while also reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions.

The Programme is being delivered through a combination of competitive grants and large-scale service provider projects.

E-Waste

The National Television and Computer Recycling Scheme has been successful in driving a substantial increase in e-waste recycling in Australia. Local governments have played a vital part in its success.

The scheme is the first national industry-funded producer responsibility scheme to be implemented in Australia.

This scheme is about recycling our television and computer e-waste, reusing valuable resources and reducing the amount of hazardous wastes ending up in landfills.

This is a significant step towards working together to keep our land clean and sustainable for our future generations.

Under the scheme, the television and computer industries have funded and recycled over 130,000 tonnes of e-waste, more than doubling the annual rate of e-waste recycling in Australia.

But I realise that there are still adjustments that need to be made at all levels of government to help support this shared arrangement of managing e-waste in Australia.

In September 2014, I announced an operational review of the scheme to look at how we can work together in partnership to put the scheme on a more sustainable footing.

The findings of the review revealed that there needs to be improved communication at all levels and I have asked the Department to facilitate ongoing dialogue between local governments and industry. The first national meeting will be held at the end of July and I encourage your participation.

On 10 June 2015, I announced my intention to increase the recycling target under the National Television and Computer Recycling Scheme to 50 per cent in 2015–16. This will increase the e-waste recycling target by an estimated 32,000 tonnes over the next four years.

Another key recommendation was to recyclers to conform to the new Australian Standard on e-waste recycling. This will ensure that e-waste is recycled safely and to the best environmental standards. Recyclers will have until 1 July 2016 to become certified to the standard.

The scheme is the centrepiece of a national approach to e-waste, where responsibility is shared between industry and state, territory and local governments.

Before I finish, I want to briefly touch on Mobile Muster, an excellent example of a product stewardship initiative that is a voluntary arrangement.

Mobile Muster is the official recycling programme of the mobile phone industry. The Australian Telecommunications Association, through Mobile Muster, collects and recycles mobile phones, batteries and accessories.

Mobile Muster aims to continue to keep old mobile phones out of landfill and recycle them in a safe, secure and environmentally sound manner.

Mobile Muster is the only industry-led mobile recycling programme in the world. Since the programme started, nearly 1,100 tonnes of mobile phone components have been collected and recycled. This includes 8.8 million handsets and batteries plus more than 550,000 kg of accessories as at 30 June 2014. I would like to congratulate Mobile Muster and thank them for their ongoing environmental stewardship.

We can all learn from the success of Mobile Muster's delivery of this voluntary product stewardship arrangement and I believe the positive changes that we will be implementing on 1 July to the television and computer recycling scheme will improve the dialogue on better management of e-waste nationally.

These industry approaches do not override the responsibility of local governments as waste managers, but they are helping to do some of the heavy lifting that is often needed at the local level to deal with growing levels of waste in our communities.

I look forward to working with industry and all levels of government to provide this invaluable service to the Australian community and to make our environment more sustainable for our future generations.

Concluding remarks

We cannot sustain economic growth without clean air and clean land, and on this we need to work together.

I would urge you to continue your involvement with the development and roll-out of the National Clean Air Agreement, the Emission Reduction Fund, the Green Army and the e-waste scheme.

I hope you enjoy your National Assembly and I look forward to hearing about the many new ideas, activities and projects discussed over the next day or so.

Thank you.