

28 March 2006

The Committee Manager
Standing Committee of Public Works
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam

Subject: Inquiry into Municipal Waste Management in NSW

The Northern Inland Regional Waste (NIRW) group of Councils wish to make a submission to the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Public Works inquiry into municipal waste management in New South Wales (NSW).

Our submission focuses on some of the key issues that assist the delivery of best practice in the management of waste, cost efficiencies and real outcomes through a collaborative approach to waste management in rural and regional NSW. The key factors that NIRW wish to identify and reinforce include:-

- The importance of consultation by the regulation makers with all the stakeholders and having regulatory outcomes that reflect the needs and aspirations of all areas of the State.
- The value of collaboration and partnership building between Councils and the important support role Government can play.
- The challenges and constraints facing rural and regional Council's in the management of waste as part of their custodial role of the environment for the people of NSW.
- The opportunities for development of new waste linked industries and technologies within regional NSW and what the government can do to assist.
- The importance of extended producer responsibility for whole of life cycle management for products and its relevance to the environmental management of waste in rural and regional NSW.

Background

NIRW is a voluntary grouping of thirteen (13) Councils from the North West and New England Region of NSW. The group was formed eight (8) years ago for the purpose of developing networks and mechanisms to facilitate both cost effective and environmentally sustainable management of waste. Its charter is far broader than dealing with just municipal waste as it reflects the real environment that regional and rural councils are obliged to deal with in managing all forms of waste as well as owning and operating waste management facilities.

Like our city counterparts, Councils within regional areas are severely challenged to effectively manage waste. The added difficulty for regional Councils is the lack of operational scale that warrants or justifies investment in new technologies, lack of population density to fund significant infrastructure, the tyranny of distance for transporting waste or recoverables and the limited market for sale of reprocessed or recovered product. At the same time, Councils are expected to achieve similar operational and environmental outcomes to the remainder of the state.

The group of Councils forming NIRW have recognised the need to be pro-active to address the shortcomings of funding capacity. Their coming together as a voluntary group reflects both the importance of working collaboratively for better outcomes for the region, whilst retaining independence to voluntarily participate in programs or contracts on a needs basis. Such flexibility is what provides the true essence for the functionality of such a group. Councils and their communities have differing needs, yet within the group of Councils there can be many with a similar identified need, hence efficiencies and cost benefits can be targeted and pursued.

THE INQUIRY HEADS

The Effectiveness Appropriateness of Current Municipal Waste Management

Comment

Councils are generally "in touch" with their respective communities and seek to provide services that their citizens are both comfortable with and have the capacity to pay for. Councils have varying demographics and socio-economic factors that can influence the type and scale of services that a Council might consider. Local Councils will be aware of such factors, consult broadly and effectively and build decisions rather than dictate service levels.

The Message

Local Councils and their regional representative groups need to be consulted vigorously by the government regulators. This will assist in ensuring that policy and regulations reflect desirable outcomes for the community and minimise the impediments for delivery of localised solutions by Councils.

Impediments and Incentives to Best Practice in Municipal Waste Management

Comment

In a rural/regional environment it is about tailoring services to achieve balanced outcomes. As an example, the proliferation of small rural landfills from a bygone era did raise questions about environmental impacts; however the contrary view was that a proliferation of small rural landfills allowed containment of waste in known and managed locations. With the introduction of various waste management regulations and the subsequent closure of many such sites, the challenge within a regional environment is to continue to facilitate delivery of waste product to managed facilities. The focus of such efforts is about avoiding the indiscriminate dumping of waste by householders (many of whom do not receive a collection service) or the return to "on farm" waste disposal practices. Councils meet these challenges by being pro-active with the delivery of cost effective programs, many of which are co-ordinated and auspiced by the regional waste groups. Again it is about recognising the needs, consulting and developing tailored solutions.

What can the Government Do

Recognise that Rural and Regional councils in NSW are very heavily constrained in their capacity to provide state of the art waste management facilities and services. The rural and regional Councils provide effective options that meet capacities of the community to pay. The Council's also manage the environmental impacts of waste in regional NSW on behalf of all NSW citizens with the very limited resources and financial capacity available. It is therefore critical that any consideration to extending the "waste levy" across NSW be rejected, as the burden for waste management in rural and regional communities is already relatively greater for regional NSW Councils.

The government can also commit to sustaining voluntary Regional Waste Groups by providing recurrent funding to allow effective planning, budgeting and formulation of Programs. Currently funding assistance is provided from the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) on a year to year basis. Whilst such funding has been both valuable and appreciated, the continuing uncertainty of funding availability has frustrated and constrained effective planning.

Outcomes achieved by regional voluntary groups such as NIRW have included regional contracts for management and processing of various waste streams, development of regionally tailored waste disposal programs, and most importantly co-ordination and facilitation of projects. The small investment by the state in the past has delivered significant gains for both the citizens of the regions and the broader NSW community. The government is urged to continue this worthwhile investment in regional voluntary waste groups to assist the ongoing management of the rural and regional environment.

The Development of New Technology and Industries Associated with Waste Management

Comment

NIRW recently commissioned studies to examine options to better manage the organic waste streams within the region. This study was far broader than managing municipal waste; however, the resultant report provides comments that are relevant to municipal waste management. The report identifies both opportunities and constraints to the development of such industries.

The Opportunities Identified

- ❖ A significant resource base of raw inputs including liquid organic waste, green waste from municipal waste and agricultural organic waste exists within the region;
- ❖ Technology exists to process and "value add" to the various organic waste streams which could be undertaken in sub regional locations.

The Constraints

- ❖ Transport costs to deliver product to a centralised processing facility;
- ❖ Government regulators not being trained in some of the newer technologies and therefore not being openly receptive to new industry investment opportunities;
- ❖ Lack of single point of contact from within government to facilitate investment;
- ❖ A decline in research and development funds;
- ❖ The difficulty in securing funding for business plan development and marketing investigations.

How can Government contribute to the solutions?

NIRW is aware of the constraints facing government both from a financial and resource demand. What is clear from the mentioned report is that partnerships are potentially available to secure both investments by the private sector and achieve an infinitely better outcome in the management of the organics waste stream. Partnerships need to be built and government can be instrumental in facilitating such private sector investment to assist in the delivery of regional development opportunities.

Government can:-

- Provide single point of contact regional facilitators for investment and development opportunities,
- Continually build capacity and knowledge within regulatory agencies to ensure private sector investment in environmentally sustainable development opportunities are not missed due to unjustifiable "red tape".

Minimising Harm to the Environment in the Provision of Waste Management Services

Comment

We live in a consumerism society and the results of this consumerism are felt within many sectors of the waste management industry. In regional and rural NSW it is felt in a number of areas including;

- Landfill impacts,
- Roadside litter; and
- Material recovery and processing costs.

The problem to date has been dealt with at the end of a products life cycle. The obligation to manage the problem has been placed on the local authority to effect disposal of the product in one manner or another.

There have been many initiatives considered and some implemented that have seen improved product disposal management. The recycling of cleaned empty chemical containers under the drumMuster program is one example where there is a system in place that deals with an otherwise potential problem.

In the municipal waste stream there are many products that contribute to the problems experienced in rural and regional areas. Many of the identifiable problems could be overcome by increasing product stewardship obligations for the people who benefit the most from their production in the first place; industry.

Road side litter is an ongoing problem and much of this litter can be attributed to causing environmental harm. The answer to the problem is not easy and local councils are committed to doing their part through education and environmental awareness programs.

The options for the government are much broader. The current review of industry stewardship for "cradle to grave" accountability for the products industry produces is to be applauded.

Government has been somewhat reluctant to tackle industry in the past. NIRW would advocate that many industry sectors are responsible for generating significant impacts for both municipal waste managers and those with a focus on sustaining the environment.

Days such as Clean Up Australia day emphasize that we as a community both fail to fulfil our environmental obligations as well as routinely accept the packaging that industry presents us with. Should the committee choose to drive down a regional highway in a drought, I am sure they would observe the roadside litter we speak of. The litter is not generally biodegradable is a blight on the landscape and contributes immeasurable harm on the fauna and general environment.

We encourage Government to Consider

- ❖ becoming more rigorous with the packaging industry,
- ❖ require use of biodegradable wrapping,

- ❖ container deposit legislation or industry product stewardship to encourage life cycle management of containers and place the cost burden where it belongs,
- ❖ consider deposit legislation for products such as tyres to encourage return of used products.

NIRW thanks you for considering its comments and looks forward to the development of ongoing partnerships and positive outcomes from your inquiry that benefits all NSW citizens.

Yours faithfully



John Davis
Executive Officer