Submission

No 9

INQUIRY INTO MUNICIPAL WASTE MANAGEMENT IN NSW

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HEALTHY SOILS AUSTRALIA Ltd.

SUBMISSION

TO THE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS

INQUIRY INTO MUNICIPAL WASTE MANAGEMENT IN NSW

Healthy Soils Australia Ltd. is a new organization that brings together farmers, independent scientists and business entrepreneurs to foster the improved health, productivity and sustainability of Australia's agricultural soils.

We see municipal waste management practices as having a huge potential to contribute positively to the economic, social and environmental well being of NSW if both well-established and newly emerging technologies for dealing with waste can be directed to improving soil health.

We take each of the terms of reference in turn:

1. The effectiveness and appropriateness of current municipal waste management

Current municipal waste management practices are economically unsound, socially irresponsible and environmentally damaging.

Economic viability
Around 60% of all NSW waste is organic in origin (food, paper, wood and garden clippings) This material can be readily composted to retain essential nutrients and return much needed organic material (especially carbon) to our soils. Instead we largely bury, burn or waste this valuable resource. As a result, municipal ratepayers are burdened with the cost of local waste management, farmers are required to meet the cost of purchasing artificial fertilizers and the whole system contributes massively to greenhouse gas emissions at an unpredictable but escalating cost to us all.

NSW does better with glass, plastic and metal recycling where some 20% is recycled, but there is room for improvement and economic benefit through new business opportunities discussed further below.

Social responsibility
There continues to be a lack of awareness of the relationship between the well being of people, the quality of their food and the health of the natural environment. This disconnectedness is reinforced by municipal practices that encourage a throwaway mindset and see people as needing to be "managed". Community education about the importance of recycling, incentives for sorting at source, community participation in waste reduction and management issues encourages a realistic understanding of these issues and places responsibility for waste where it should be, with each and every one of us.

Environmental impacts
Environmental damage resulting from current practices is both direct and indirect. Direct negative impacts include the landfill sites themselves, their associated health risks, their contamination of ground water and run off (especially during heavy rain events) and direct greenhouse and other gaseous emissions. Indirect impacts are the reliance of the farming

Healthy Soils Australia is currently participating in a new model for municipal waste management with the Palerang Council that has the potential to raise the bar way above current best practice and put NSW in the forefront in sustainable waste management practices.

4. The development of new technology and industries associated with waste management

The technologies that will address the municipal waste problems are not new. Nature has been doing it for billions of years and human societies that have adopted non-exploitative farming practices in parts of Asia have been doing it for thousands of years. What is new is our better understanding of the biological processes involved. In particular bio-conversion processes which turn organic waste streams into high quality products are becoming available and offer huge new business opportunities. New forms of pyrolysis which turns organic material into activated carbon (without green house gas emissions) for use in soils, new bio-assay techniques for monitoring levels of biological activity and approaches for separating the components of waste streams safely are also becoming increasingly available.

But the most important innovations are those that avoid the problem of waste in the first place. These include designing products and buildings that can be de-constructed at the end of their economic life and re-built or re-manufactured.

Healthy Soils Australia Ltd, while itself a not-for-profit entity, has a number of members who are specialising in these areas and will no doubt provide the Inquiry with any specialist knowledge it may require.

5. Minimizing harm to the environment in the provision of waste management services.

We need to go well beyond harm minimisation. Even a little harm is too much. We need to remediate the environmental harm we have already done, to mitigate climate change and improve our quality of life and especially the quality of our food.

We submit that bio-remediation techniques along the lines being developed for the Palerang Shire are able to achieve these sorts of outcomes. Details of the strategies and technologies being developed for the Palerang, zero waste, resource recovery strategy can be made available to the inquiry when complete and may provide a useful blueprint for the adoption of similar tailored zero waste strategies in other areas of NSW and Australia.

Although our work for the Palerang Shire is not yet complete and we cannot discuss specific details, we are able to brief the Committee on the broad principles before our report is finalised.

Healthy Soils Australia Ltd March 2006