



Submission to the Victorian Government Climate Change White Paper consultation process

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Introduction

This submission is based around the Climate Change White Paper 10 strategic directions and important considerations specifically relevant to Local Governments, which should be captured during the White Paper consultation process. Comments expressed are not prioritised, as each topic is considered on balance to be equally important for Victoria. The comments expressed in this submission are from the Council's Environment unit who coordinated the process of obtaining comment from across Council functions. The submission has not been formally ratified by Council as the timeframe to submit a response does not align with a Council meeting

'Climate change is the greatest social, economic and environmental challenge that Victoria, Australia and the world is facing. The MAV recognises that the implications of this will result in local government being at the 'coal face' of managing the impacts of climate change and providing leadership for the broader community. This responsibility will require councils to continue to implement mitigation strategies and adapt their activities and resource allocation to address challenges, potentially at a considerable cost to the sector. Victorian councils have recognised the importance of climate change, as the MAV's recent state wide strategic work plan consultation showed, climate change is one of the top three issues of concern for local government'.

Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), Consultation Draft Submission, June 2008.

The above statement quoted from the MAV's consultation draft submission to the Climate Change White Paper consultation process highlights the potential for major implications that climate change will have on the Local Government sector. However, it fails to acknowledge the fact that climate change as an issue, and its ramifications on the Victorian community, is still not widely understood. Elected members, managers and operational staff of municipalities across Victoria (particularly in rural and regional areas) still have difficulty understanding the depth and scale of climate change impacts, and furthermore, will continue to struggle with developing adequate resource capacity, and effective response strategies to deal with these impacts at the governance, jurisdictional and operational levels.

While the Council staff are generally supportive of the overall thread of the MAV's submission, they seek in this submission to highlight some additional important points consistent with the "ten strategic directions" the State Government has identified in the Climate Change discussion paper.

Key climate change considerations

1. Principles for developing climate change policy

The State Government should incorporate the following set of general sustainability principles when developing all climate change policies:

- Incorporation and integration of climate change policy across all sectors of government decisions, and all levels of government;
- Set sound science based triggers for action and adaptation;
- Apply the Principle of Intergenerational Equity;
- Apply the Precautionary Principle;
- Apply the risk framework of Alternative Assessments for all new development approvals;
- Recognition of the unique need for immediacy in setting climate change policy responses;
- Recognition of competing community interests in setting policy responses;
- Recognition of the need for investing in substantial capacity building for effective on-ground responses and actions.

2. Infrastructure assets management

State and local governments should work in partnership to ensure the viable condition of infrastructure assets across the state is maintained as climate change impacts increase.

- Fast-track introduction of science-based data modelling of climate change impacts on public infrastructure to confidently measure the impacts and assess the costs as a priority.
- The full cost burden of maintaining public infrastructure in the face of climate change impacts should be spread across the Victorian community, and not solely reside with local rate payers.

3. Responsible economic development

Striving for continuous increases in economic growth makes energy intensity and emissions a “locked-in” scenario, emissions reductions very difficult, and increases future development pressures on stressed natural resources, and fosters a continuation of high energy consumption lifestyles in the wider community.

- The State Government should work responsibly with Local Government to ensure that rural and regional communities are not significantly disadvantaged through the development of industry opportunities within the emerging “low carbon economy”, through encouraging and supporting regionalised innovations and market based incentives for local and rural industries.
- The State Government should amend its solar “feed-in tariff” levels to capture gross metering rather than net metering, and set an immediate time frame for extending the feed-in tariff scheme to commercial and industrial customers, which are acknowledged as the major drivers of investment for emissions reduction.
- The State Government can demonstrate leadership by switching economic investments to new products and services produced by clean energy resources and technology, and tap into university and other research facilities to fast-track the necessary innovation and change.

- This economic advantage could be achieved in part, through a revolving investment innovation fund that puts a share of government's investment returns from successful technology sales to overseas customers back into the system for supporting new project development in rural and regional areas.

4. Environmental management and biodiversity

Local Government's role within strategic and statutory planning and various development controls can directly and indirectly influence environmental management outcomes and biodiversity assets. Local Government's role as land managers for large networks of roadsides and certain areas of crown land, as well as meeting obligations under State and Federal legislative responsibilities, mean that they are a major stakeholder in environmental management. The State Government need to recognise that local government, particularly rural and regional municipalities have limited resources to manage the networks of crown land reserves. Additional management responsibilities would need to be adequately resources.

- Municipal economies in rural and regional areas are highly dependant on economic uses of land and agricultural land management being able to be sustained over the long-term.
- Prime agricultural lands are at risk of being targeted for other types of development without adequate scientific study of land capability and biodiversity values to underpin decisions that permit such changes in land use or development.
- Fully support sustainable agriculture systems and a shift to farming technologies that are not energy intensive, and that put carbon back into soils through higher retention of organic matter.
- State Government can support these changes to agricultural management systems through DPI, to help transition to a low carbon, high sequestration methodology for agriculture.
- Integration of combinations of biodiversity/carbon credits and land stewardship incentives programs that pay land managers to plant diverse native vegetation plantations not for harvesting, but to sequester carbon and enhance biodiversity and sustainable farm production are the responsible ways forward.
- Parks and crown land reserves will become essential islands of refuge for biodiversity to adapt to climate change stress and allow species to migrate and can be important carbon sinks for the future in their own right.

The State Government should review and strengthen the State Planning Framework to protect the viability and sustainability of rural agriculture and food production in the face of climate change impacts.

5. Emergency management services

The State Government could establish a dedicated emergency response "State-wide Super Fund" to finance the increasing responses to new and emerging events driven by climate change induced stress that may place undue strain on rural and regional communities and the Victorian economy. This would equitably share the burden of cost across the whole Victorian community rather than have that burden fall solely on local rate payers.

6. Health and aged care services

The state's most vulnerable regions, communities and individuals to climate change are likely to be coastal communities, agricultural communities, low income families, the sick and elderly, and our children. Local Government plays an important role in providing services to these community sectors and as increased demands are placed on systems local government will need to be appropriately resourced to be able to adequately respond in a timely and efficient manner.

7. Community education and engagement

There is an urgent need to reorganise the education system to meet the needs of a totally different economy and technical expertise base that is the future skills base for a low carbon future. The government's discussion paper asks "*what are the essential elements of what we want to maintain as we adapt our settlements to a low carbon profile?*"

The key elements that must be maintained in the face of climate change variability are:

- Standards and quality of life for all Victorians,
- Ethical and equitable businesses and communities,
- Essential services, such as emergency, health and education,
- Biodiversity, clean water, air and healthy food production systems,
- Cohesive, adaptive, engaged communities.

Greater understanding, education and awareness of the potential impacts and possible options for adaptation and mitigation of climate change impacts are required.

- These are important tasks that are beyond the capacity and resources of rural and regional Local Governments.
- Therefore the State Government should ramp up education and awareness programs and commensurate investment targeting regional communities that specifically addresses the socially constructed commitments of our existing frameworks and dependency on high resource use and energy consumption, and a lack of understanding and commitment to climate change mitigation actions and adaptation.

8. Water resources and use

Local Government has responsibilities that use water, for the maintenance of community parks, gardens and sporting fields, and in rural and regional areas, for the provision and maintenance of community road networks, drought relief and fire prevent activities.

- The State Government can support Local Government to progress introduction of water saving technologies and water substitution and re-use projects that save potable water through dedicated funding, and strengthening regulations.

9. Resource recovery and waste management

The Victorian Government should fast-track new technologies to process wastes to minimise emissions and extract energy under a “full-life-cycle-assessment” framework.

- Large scale treatment of organic waste will be expensive and will require significant new investments.
- The introduction of these new systems can be efficiently achieved through economies of scale whereby regional facilities could strategically service clusters of adjoining municipalities in rural and regional areas.
- The full burden of cost to introduce these new waste processing systems must not be passed on to local ratepayers, but shared across the Victorian community.

10. Energy resources and use

State Government should lead by example and remove all legislative barriers and perverse incentives and subsidies that continue to encourage and support intensive energy use and high emissions outputs, old energy inefficient technologies, energy inefficient businesses and industrial production processes, and work to create new, effective market based incentives for these old technologies to change rapidly to clean energy sources and create an efficient, lower energy consumption/low carbon economic profile for Victoria.

11. Land use planning and development

The assets most vulnerable to climate change are likely to be agricultural lands, biodiversity and natural areas, coastal environments, estuaries, small rural settlements and public community infrastructure.

- Applying the Precautionary Principle of Sustainable Development to the serious potential impacts of climate change on the global ecosystem and human economy should guide all land use planning and development decisions.
- Stopping urban sprawl in the human settlement design and planning phase, restoring pedestrian accessibility to urban areas to reduce car dependency, and switching to a decentralised power generation model that generates electricity at the household where it is used through grid interactive solar power systems, and phase out coal powered dependency. These are some of the planning tools that will be required to combat climate change.
- The “Five Star Energy Rating” system in the State building code is totally inadequate to achieve necessary deep reductions in emissions and energy dependency in home design and new housing developments. A much more stringent, effective level of energy efficiency must be mandated through the State building code.
- The mandated introduction of grid-interactive solar power systems for all new home approvals should be applied to achieve these ends while at the same time contributing to strengthening the economic shift to a low carbon industrial base for Victoria.
- The building code should also capture building permit applications for all types of renovations to ensure the widest possible up-take of high energy efficiency measures in the housing sector can be achieved.
- The State Government must review the adequacy of the Victorian Planning Provisions and State Planning Framework to ensure that appropriate permit triggers exist for the full spectrum of climate change implications and to enable consideration of the most responsible course of action on a case by case basis.

- Prohibited and time-limited development zones and overlays are effective tools that could be introduced to deal with the full spectrum of climate change scenarios.
- The State Government can play a lead role by developing new decision guidance frameworks that are consistent across Victoria. Including new climate change education kits for elected Councillors, new risk analysis tools for planners and accurate sea level rise vulnerability maps as reference materials for all coastal councils to assist in responsible planning and decision making by Local Government. These initiatives are vital to address the serious and genuine risks associated with potential class actions and litigation that will arise from adversely affected private asset owners along the entire Victorian coast.

The government's discussion paper asks, *"How do we ensure that no perverse environmental outcomes occur through encouraging emission reduction in areas such as forestry, agriculture and geosequestration?"*

- Mandating strict biodiversity outcomes as part of the process, by placing the responsibility of negative impacts on the proponent of any development, geosequestration or other projects will assist the best possible outcomes.
- Integrating combinations of biodiversity/carbon credits and land stewardship incentives programs that pay land managers to plant diverse native vegetation plantations not for harvesting to sequester carbon and enhance biodiversity in urban settlements.
- These incentives must be competitive with other market forces that may act as barriers to emissions reduction outcomes.

Review of CMA Regional Catchment Strategies can be an opportunity for regional communities to plan specifically for the regions capacity to adapt by widening the scope of their engagement with all sectors of the community.

The State Government should strengthen the role and resources of Sustainability Victoria to help review and deliver these programs across the state.

12. Transport

Focus on reducing car dependency at all levels of society, redesign human settlements for greater public transport use, powered by renewable energy sources and increase options for small scale, rural and regional communities that reduce the distance between work and home and provide viable options to private motor vehicle dependency.

- The State Government needs to identify and invest in fair and equitable alternatives to private motor vehicle dependency wherever possible in rural and regional Victoria through viable alternatives such as local bike trails, township walking paths and interconnecting village light-rail commuter train and bus services.

13. The role of Local Government

The State Government can lead by example across all sectors of government operations through rapid change initiatives, infrastructure investment policy and real emissions reductions targets built into government policy and legislation.

- Work more closely with local governments and listen to regional differences and local priorities for resource, economic and community resilience.
- Real, achievable emissions reductions targets need to be built into government policy and legislation.
- The State Government can facilitate and guide the revision process of Municipal Strategic Statements to better reflect climate change impacts and enable decision making responses.

References

Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), Consultation Draft Submission, June 2008.

O'Brien, M. 2002, Making Better Environmental Decisions: An Alternative to Risk Assessment. MIT Press, Cambridge (USA).

Victorian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2008. *A Climate of Opportunity*, Summit Paper.

Closing date for submissions is Friday 4th July 2008

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