

# THE EMERGING AUSTRALIAN ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAM

Jack C. Fraser  
California Department of Fish and Game<sup>1</sup>  
Yountville, California

Trying to cover the Australian environmental situation in twenty minutes is an impossible task, and I serve notice at the outset that I shall not attempt it. I'll cover a few points and then let a few pictures whet your interest.

Australia is in a transitional stage. Having declined from former greatness as a sheep raising member of the British Empire, it is now attempting to rise to new greatness as an industrialized country. It aspires to a role of South Pacific, perhaps even South Pacific-Asiatic leadership, in addition to an independence nourished by an industrial economy. At the same time it has been wedded to a growth economy, supported mostly by a wealth of newly discovered mineral and petroleum resources, and by government-encouraged population increases. Conflict of objectives deplore the artificiality of America, but are hell bent to emulate the technology and affluence of America.

Unfortunately, all of this has happened rather quickly -- too quickly for the average Australian personality and limited technology to make it really successful. The average Australian does not have a burning passion for change, on the contrary he tends to resist it with a passion. He doesn't like to be rushed -- unless it is to get that last beer before the bar closes. The desire for growth and industrialization has not been adequately supported by the necessary changes in government organization and systems and in the efficiency of labor and professional forces.

Generally speaking, many of its governmental organizations, systems and attitudes are holdovers from the days of the sheep economy and a small population. One of the many difficulties that this has causes is that pollution, in all its forms, and other environmental hazards are not being adequately corrected by the state governments.

<sup>1</sup> Formerly Chairman of the Environmental Protection Authority of the State of Victoria, Australia.

To varying degrees, the governments of all five States and the Federal government were under concerted public attack for their failure to cope with pollution problems when I arrived there three years ago. The newspapers were on the warpath and government officials were ducking for cover.

The problem in Victoria was easy to analyze. A simplified summary would be that pollution control and the administration of environmental matters was fragmented among more than a dozen State agencies. No single agency had enough jurisdiction, power or legislative backing to do the job, but the bureaucratic heads of this dozen or more agencies would not relinquish any of their prerogatives in the interest of getting the job done. Pollution fines were humorously small, and the legislative protection given to would-be polluters was reminiscent of similar protections given to development activities in this country early in this century. As a result, very little or no pollution control was being exercised, and yet the State was continuing to grow in population and in industrial activity.

I was given the task of writing a legislative bill which, if enacted, would establish a new and comprehensive system of air, water and land pollution control as well as the control of noise and litter. At this point the fun began, and for six weeks I wound my way through the bureaucracies of an unfamiliar government system and tried to fit new ideas into unyielding legal structures and gain their acceptance by hostile department heads. At the end of the first week I was certain of one thing -- I was doomed to fail. At the end of six weeks the bill was ready for introduction. It passed both Houses of Parliament in two weeks. The Legislative process can be frighteningly quick in Australia -- or agonizingly slow.

The enacted bill was called the Environment Protection Act. It established a three-man commission called The Environmental Protection Authority and gave it rather sweeping powers to control all types of pollution, manage solid wastes; to control noise and to engage in waste management, investigation, enforcement, and research activities. It provided for fines which were very significant by Australian standards (\$5,000 compared to the former maximum of \$50) and new and streamlined procedures were included for expeditious prosecution of polluters. A system of licenses for all waste discharges was called for and violation of the terms of the license was sufficient for prosecution and imposition of maximum fines. Proving that pollution is taking place as the result of non-compliance with license terms is not a necessary precursor to prosecution under the Act.

The remainder of my time was devoted to recruiting the personnel to implement the Act. Professional talent is limited in Australia. There are good men but their ranks are thin and with low State salaries the recruiting task is difficult. It was made doubly difficult by an autocratic Public Service Board which operated under antiquated legislation, policies and concepts. Despite these obstacles we were able to recruit a good but badly underpaid staff.

In this young, bright and energetic staff of the new Victoria Environmental Protection Authority lies the future of environment management in Australia. It is the leader now and I am confident that in time the other four states will follow its lead. Environmental impact reporting is on its way and as soon as adequate funds are pumped into the system Australia will have a pollution control and environmental protection program to match its population and industrial growth.