

ENVIRONMENT MINISTERS MEETING 1

Agreed Communiqué – 15 April 2021

A virtual meeting of National Environment Ministers has focussed on national environmental priorities including: climate adaptation and resilience, bushfire recovery and resilience; the implementation of the National Waste Policy Action Plan; and, progress on environmental regulation and reform.

The Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to working collaboratively in delivering practical outcomes to address the range of challenges facing our environment.

The meeting was the first since the *Review of COAG Councils and Ministerial Forums* (Conran Review), recognised the importance of the Environment Minister's Forum and the streamlining of priority outcomes.

Key issues discussed:

National Waste Policy Action Plan

Environment Ministers agreed to work collaboratively to improve the harmonisation of municipal waste collection, taking the first step within each state through the implementation of standards within each jurisdiction for kerbside recycling, and a national implementation road map that considers costs and benefits.

The Ministers agreed in principle to support a roll out of Food Organics and Garden Organics (FOGO) waste collection services in partnership with the Commonwealth to address current gaps in waste collection streams.

To provide greater certainty for industry, Ministers have identified eight 'problematic and unnecessary' plastic product types for industry to phase out nationally by 2025 (or sooner in some cases) under the National Waste Policy Action Plan. These are lightweight plastic bags; plastic products misleadingly termed as 'degradable'; plastic straws; plastic utensils and stirrers; expanded polystyrene (EPS) consumer food containers (e.g. cups and clamshells); EPS consumer goods packaging (loose fill and moulded); and microbeads in personal health care products.

With respect to Container Deposit Schemes Ministers also agreed to harmonisation for the containers (size and products) across jurisdictions, refund amounts, standards for labelling, and community education by the end of 2025, ensuring consistent recycling collection strategies across all states.

Climate adaptation and resilience

Environment Ministers discussed the vital role cooperation will play in building a more climate resilient Australia. Recognising the differing but complementary roles Australia's three levels of government have in responding to a changing climate, Ministers discussed priorities to ensure our natural resources, environment and water infrastructure are more resilient to climate impacts from drought, heatwaves, bushfires, and other natural disasters. Ministers agreed to work together to support the development of the Australian Government's 2021 National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy to set up a roadmap towards national climate resilience. The Commonwealth also agreed to engage with states and territories in the lead up to COP 26.

Bushfire recovery and resilience

Environment Ministers highlighted the importance of continued collaboration to identify and address wildlife impacts from the Black Summer bushfires, including the ongoing streamlining of scientific assessment processes for individual species, the control of feral predators and pests and the restoration of habitats.

They shared learnings from the fires and agreed the importance of cross jurisdictional collaboration and the role of the Morrison Government's \$200 million Wildlife and Habitat Bushfire Recovery Fund, in addition to the contributions from the jurisdictions, towards the recovery to date.

The Ministers remain committed to both the strategic scientific assessment of ongoing threats to species and to practical on ground measures such as weed control, captive breeding programs, ongoing pest control and community projects including the provision of nesting boxes and erosion barriers.

Annual reporting on koala population and conservation strategies

Ministers agreed to support and collaborate on the National Koala Monitoring Program, providing data and other information to establish a national-level monitoring framework.

As part of an \$18 million Commonwealth koala conservation package, the monitoring program will help states better understand the trends in koala populations across the country and more effectively target conservation efforts.

Building upon the outcomes of a national koala monitoring workshop in February 2021, the design of the program is underway, with implementation to commence in mid-2021.

Environmental Regulation and *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* reform

Environment Ministers agreed to continue to work constructively to progress approval bilateral agreements to deliver National Cabinet's commitment to implement single touch environmental approvals. In line with the position of the National Cabinet, the Morrison Government remains committed to delivering single touch environmental approvals with states and territories. Single touch approvals will reduce duplication in environmental approval processes by accrediting Australian state and territory processes under the EPBC Act.

Ministers noted the National Cabinet priority to introduce national environmental standards reflecting the current requirements of the EPBC Act. They noted the Commonwealth's commitment to subsequent phases of reform to address further changes and improvements, including to environmental standards, taking into account the recommendations of the independent review led by Professor Graeme Samuel AC. This process is already underway and is underpinned by stakeholder engagement, including with states and territories. Ministers noted the Commonwealth's undertaking to provide a timeline for subsequent phases of reform. The Commonwealth indicated there would be opportunities to consider resourcing arrangements through the bilateral agreement negotiations.

Implementation of the Conran Review

National Cabinet agreed that the Environment Ministers' forum would be maintained as a regular and ongoing ministers meeting. The Conran Review reforms included the rationalisation of several councils and committees, and called for the streamlining of work programs, to focus on delivering priority outcomes. Environment ministers agreed to pursuing key national priorities for the next 12 months, and to the development of a workplan that captures these outcomes.

Response to the independent review of the *National Environment Protection Council Act 1994*

Ministers have tasked their Senior Officials Group to consider the legislative changes and implications to the *National Environment Protection Council Act 1994* (NEPC Act) following the decision to disband the National Environment Protection Council. Ministers also endorsed the response to the 2019 Review of the NEPC Act.

National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality) Measure

A variation to the National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality) Measure was agreed to strengthen standards for ozone (O₃), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and sulfur dioxide (SO₂). This is the conclusion of an extensive process, including community and stakeholder engagement, to strengthen and modernise ambient air quality standards to reflect the latest scientific understanding of the health effects of air pollution.