

A bold blueprint

Steve Davidson reviews Western Australia's ambitious, timely, and leading State Sustainability Strategy.

Western Australia may be behind the eastern States in terms of time, but the WA Government has stolen the march when it comes to sustainability policy. In September 2003, the Government formally and fully committed Western Australians to a sustainable way of doing things with release of a wide-ranging, 300-page sustainability strategy for the next 5 to 10 years, and beyond.

In the words of the WA Premier, the Hon Dr Geoff Gallop MLA, *Hope for the future: The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy* is 'Australia's first comprehensive sustainability strategy at the State level.' It recognises the need 'to use sustainability as an integrated, whole of government approach to many deep-seated issues.' It is a trail-blazing blueprint that shows the way for other States, if not countries.

The Strategy was developed through government agencies and a two-year public process involving, among other things: the establishment of a WA Collaboration of civil society peak groups; research students who wrote Background Papers and Case Studies; a travelling exhibition; hundreds of public seminars; and, finally, an international sustainability conference where it was launched.

The Strategy is much more than a collection of motherhood statements, although it includes the obligatory definition of sustainability, here: '*meeting the needs of current and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement, and economic prosperity*'.

Principal authors of the Strategy, Professor Peter Newman and Michael Rowe, of the government's

Sustainability Policy Unit, add that 'this definition reflects an aspiration and a process to achieve real outcomes.' It is a challenging definition because it goes beyond the much-quoted triple bottom line and 'demands that we act together, providing an integrated and mutually reinforcing approach to issues that in the past have been treated more in isolation.'

Sustainability is essentially a way of asking the world to resolve a fundamental tension that has developed between environmental, social and economic improvement. The concept is simple, but implementation is difficult. It can also seem fuzzy until it is applied to real situations.

With this in mind, the Strategy seeks to give sustainability meaning for Western Australia's regions, issues, projects and communities. In particular, its purpose is to illustrate how the State government will adopt a sustainability framework, which is the core of the document. It highlights actions across government agencies that demonstrate the government's leadership role in supporting a transition to a sustainable future.

However, the government is quick to emphasise that it wants to develop partnerships with local government, industry and non-government organisations – including the community. The Strategy was developed in deep consultation with the community and, to its credit, it establishes actual mechanisms to support the active participation of stakeholders in initiatives for sustainability. Of course there is already much innovation by individuals, communities, industry and local government, but more ongoing involvement is needed to implement and further develop the strategy.

The Perth to Mandurah Railway is the largest and most comprehensive integrated transport project ever undertaken in Western Australia. It will create a 48-minute link over the 71km journey (20 minutes faster than an average car trip).

Harvest Lakes is Landcorp's flagship program for demonstrating sustainable land development. This is Western Australia's first, and Australia's largest, HIA Greensmart Village, featuring solar-oriented lot design, water management and community development programs with mandatory energy efficiency measures in all homes. The first two stages of land release sold out very rapidly.



State Sustainability Strategy/Landcorp

Six goals and lots of action

Although it rarely sets deadlines and mostly doesn't attempt to provide specific details, the Strategy clearly sets out a number of actions under each of the Government's six goals for sustainability. The idea is to illustrate how the principles of sustainability, embodied in the framework, can start to be applied across the whole of government and the community. Some key examples of the many actions set out in the Strategy under each of the six broad goals are:

Goal 1: Ensure that the way we govern is driving the transition to a sustainable future. Example actions:

- Develop a **Sustainability Act** that embeds the principles of sustainability in government actions and processes and supports reporting on the outcomes through a periodic **State of Sustainability Report**.
- Require government agencies to respond to a **Sustainability Code of Practice for Government Agencies** and to develop a **Sustainability Action Plan** to address a range of issues including energy use, greenhouse emissions, waste minimisation, community engagement and sustainability procurement.
- Create a **Sustainability Roundtable** with community and industry expertise.

Goal 2: Play our part in solving the global challenges of sustainability. Example actions:

- Facilitate the new **Global Centre for Sustainability** (combining expertise from universities, TAFE, CSIRO, government and industry) to undertake major international partnership projects on population, development aid and environmental technology.
- Implement a **Western Australian Greenhouse Strategy** and continue to develop innovative contributions to the global greenhouse issue.
- Develop a **Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Act**, create 30 new National Parks under the policy to

protect old-growth forests and five new marine reserves, assess the need for new reserves, and support the linking of major terrestrial reserves with areas of privately owned bush and regeneration areas.

Goal 3: Value and protect our environment and ensure the sustainable management and use of natural resources. Example actions:

- Develop a new vision for the **Ningaloo Coast** including fast tracking World Heritage nomination for Cape Range–Ningaloo Coast.
- Strengthen the **Nuclear Waste Facility (Prohibition) Act 1999** so that it prohibits the transport or storage of any nuclear waste in Western Australia.
- **Coordinate** the actions of local governments, regional councils and State natural resource management agencies on priority natural resource issues, such as regional drainage, biodiversity corridors, local community services and coastal planning.

Goal 4: Plan and provide settlements that reduce the ecological footprint and enhance our quality of life.

Example actions:

- Implement the **State Water Strategy** and continue to develop long-term solutions for water conservation and water supply including more community scale re-use applications.
- Emphasise the **revitalisation of suburbs** and, as part of Greater Perth, establish growth management to control urban sprawl.
- Overcome car dependence through development that builds on the doubling of the rail system, revamp the **Perth Bike Plan** and introduce a **SmartRider** ticketing system for public transport.
- Develop a **Strategic Framework for Waste Management** working towards zero waste by 2020.

Goal 5: Support communities to fully participate in achieving a sustainable future. Example actions:

- Involve the community in developing 'place management' approaches through an **integrated**

community services framework to help prioritise and co-locate services.

- Create an **Education for Sustainability Competition** based on student projects and school plans demonstrating sustainability.

Goal 6: Assist business to benefit from and contribute to sustainability. Example actions:

- Establish training schemes to provide a capacity in new areas of professional activity for sustainability such as a TAFE centre of specialisation in **applied sustainability**.
- Review taxation, subsidies and financial incentives to promote sustainability and support **Sustainability Investment Tours**.
- Create **industry sustainability covenants** that recognise and help to market sustainability innovation and leadership.
- Develop, through **industry partnerships**, new approaches to sustainable building, eco-efficiency, sustainability assessment, mining and petroleum production sustainability, corporate social responsibility and the new sustainability research and development agenda.

The team that devised the Strategy earlier distributed a Consultation Paper and a Draft of the document and received 171 submissions from individuals, organisations and government agencies. All were considered and many suggestions were incorporated in the final document. So how has the State Sustainability Strategy been received.

Reactions to the Strategy

The Chamber of Minerals and Energy (CME) of Western Australia, representing 20 companies that produce 85% of Australia's mineral output, 'supports the general thrust of the Strategy', but would prefer the term 'sustainable development' in the title. An initiative by 25 of the world's major mining companies including seven companies active in WA has already established 12 fundamental principles of sustainable development and the CME WA says these are compatible with the direction of the State's policy. Publication of the Strategy also has prompted the CME to establish its own Sustainable Development Group.

'This exercise in imagining the way we may live in 10, 20 or 30 years time is absolutely essential,' says Robyn Williams, science commentator and former Chairman of the Commission for the Future. 'I congratulate Western Australia on doing something that the rest of the country should urgently follow.'

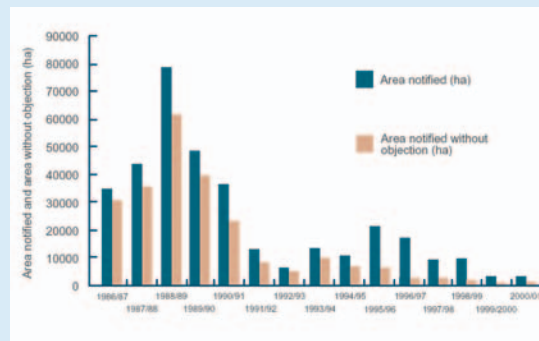
The WA Sustainable Energy Association makes several recommendations including one that Western Australia needs a Minister with responsibility for sustainability. It suggests that WA could look to the lead of the Victorian Government where the Minister for the Environment is now the Minister for Sustainability and Environment.

Sustainable Population Australia naturally enough supports the view that the 'global population needs to stabilise, as a continuously growing population undermines sustainability' (quoting the Strategy). However, it takes the authors to task for not applying this to WA given that population size and growth 'is a multiplying factor for every issue' that the Strategy raises'.

Why WA needs the Strategy

The State's environmental and social issues include:

- 4.4 million hectares affected by salinity or at risk of further salinisation – this could double over the next 50 years
- rainfall runoff in the south-west of WA has decreased by 50% over the past 25 years, partly due to climate change
- salinity and over-grazing threaten about one-quarter of endangered plant species
- south-west WA is ranked twelfth out of the world's 25 most significant biodiversity 'hotspots'
- Western Australians consume a lot of resources – especially water, land and transport energy
- health and social indicators reveal high levels of deprivation in Indigenous communities
- the populations and economies of many rural communities and parts of Perth are in decline – leading to social and environmental problems.



WA Department of Agriculture

Clearing applications under the Soil and Land Conservation Act (1986–2002).

The Western Australia Farmers Federation, the State's largest rural lobby organisation, welcomes the Strategy and its triple bottom line initiative as it reinforces the WAFarmers policy position on sustainable farming and its linkages to property rights. However, the organisation thinks that in reality 'recent Government environmental "reform" has been solely focused on the environmental aspect of the "reform"

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The woolly is the world's first mammal species removed from the international threatened species list as a result of research and management actions by the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management.



Babs and Bert Wells/Department of Conservation and Land Management



State Sustainability Strategy/New Metro Rail

Transport efficiency is a key element of new suburb planning in Perth. Rail patronage has dramatically increased in WA over the last 10 years.

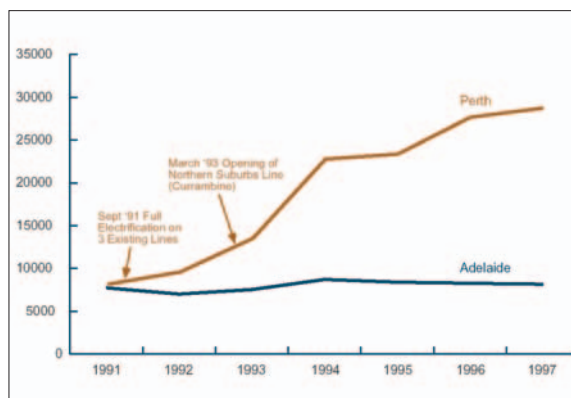
with minimal or no consideration given to the economic and social impacts on landowners and their rural communities.'

President of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, Björn Stigson, responded with 'I am impressed by the work that you and the government of Western Australia have been doing to create a sustainable development strategy for your state. I have not come across any similar extensive process as that you are going through anywhere else in the world.'

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of WA, with a membership of 5000 companies has faint praise for the Strategy. It pointedly argues that 'the role of government in achieving sustainable development is mainly to enable, facilitate and support rather than to direct or prohibit.' The CCI views concepts such as sustainable development and the triple bottom line as 'supportable and potentially beneficial at organisational level – but only if the multiple and conflicting demands that they impose are ultimately subordinate to the organisation's overarching, substantive goal.' In the case of businesses this goal is the interests of shareholders.

By contrast, the Conservation Council of WA was keen to see legislative reform and its recommendation of a Sustainability Act to enshrine sustainability principles was adopted in the final Strategy. The Council says it 'will be watching closely to ensure the Strategy actually does deliver some significant reforms towards sustainability. There is not a lot of action yet to suggest that the State Government is fundamentally changing the way it does business.'

Rail patronage in Perth compared to Adelaide 1991–1997.



State Sustainability Strategy/Jeff Kenworthy, Murdoch University

Can land development be sustainable?

Inevitably, strain arises between economic, environmental and social goals but the Strategy seeks to resolve them through finding mutual benefit. This sounds difficult, but even the apparently intractable process of land development can strive for sustainability, something that was demonstrated by a recent study conducted by the WA Department of Housing and Works.

When Landstart, the development arm of HomesWest, was proposing to build at a site in Forrestdale, it decided to look at what would be different if the development went ahead using sustainability principles, and what this might cost. The idea was to integrate energy and water conservation, better site ecology, walkability and transit-orientation, and improved community-based design.

The end result is a revelation. The Forrestdale development will demonstrate 60% water saving and 50% energy savings. It utilises Liveable Neighbourhood design principles and provides a more attractive land development from community and services perspectives. It saved \$1575 per block and net benefit can be demonstrated for all aspects of sustainability. Similar innovations are now being attempted in land developments right across Perth.

New Zealand's Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Dr J Morgan Williams, regards the Strategy as 'a truly excellent document in many ways'. He sees some big challenges though. 'The big one for me lies within our current financial and economic systems. They are where the biggest influences on long-term sustainability lie: the taxes, policies, investment and market behaviour and practices that continue to lead to unsustainable behaviours.'

Dr Elizabeth Heij, Facilitator of the Sustainability Network at CSIRO, concluded that: 'This is such an excellent example of well-integrated strategy directed at the complex issues of sustainable development that it will be read, copied and drawn on far and wide. Personally, I would classify both the process and the result as "wisdom in governance".'

It would be a miracle if the Strategy met the approval of all Western Australians all of the time and the above comments highlight the realisation that sustainability means very different things to different people. However, the very existence of the Strategy suggests that the WA Government is serious about sustainability and its broad scope is encouraging. The proof will be in the implementation. The authors regard the Strategy as a work in progress. It is part of the journey to sustainability, not the destination.

As Commissioner Williams puts it, 'the Strategy is a great effort. If similar inspiration and effort on its implementation can be maintained by Western Australia over the next decade, WA will be a truly great place to live, to be an endangered species and to do business.'

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