

The goal: sustainable development

If Australia is to maintain high living standards and a growing population without continuing environmental damage, it needs ESD — ecologically sustainable development. That's easily said, but is ESD an achievable goal? A major federal government project is attempting to come to grips with the complex issues involved, define the main areas needing action and determine what that action should be.

Dr Roy Green, Director of the CSIRO Institute of Natural Resources and Environment, is a key player in the exercise. As chair of the ESD working groups on agriculture, fisheries and forestry, he takes seriously the Prime Minister's message that consensus among working group members should not be achieved at the cost of 'lowest common denominator' conclusions that would 'do little to progress a move towards ecologically sustainable development'.

Dr Green believes that the recommendations from the nine ESD working groups will play a big part in shaping Australia's future. He expects some will be fairly easy and inexpensive to implement, but others will involve major attitudinal change and expense and require a possibly unprecedented degree of local, State and national co-operation.

Sustainable development has many definitions. One of the most popular comes from the World Commission on Environment and Development's report 'Our Common Future', published in 1987, which defines it simply as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

According to our government's discussion paper on ESD, 'the task confronting us is to take better care of the environment while ensuring economic growth, both now and in the future'.

Last year the nine working groups began the job of identifying the main issues, policy options and costs. Each group has members drawn from the Commonwealth and State governments, industry, conservation interests and unions, and focuses on one of nine major industry sectors — agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy production, manufacturing, mining, transport, energy use and tourism.

Issues that extend across sectors, such as climate change, 'biodiversity' and public health, will be the subject of an additional report.

Working to tight deadlines, the groups have until July to produce draft reports for circulation and comment and then until October to finalise them. Recommendations are due to be discussed at a Premiers' Conference in November, with decisions following soon after.

How is it going? Very well, says Dr Green. His three groups meet monthly, usually spending one day in discussions with people from the industries concerned and another preparing their report. To encourage involvement in the consultation program, they are holding meetings around the country.

The groups have commissioned a range of papers on issues and strategies — many from CSIRO support teams set up to provide technical input to each group. Dr Green is heartened by the co-operative attitudes and willingness of the groups to explore different points of view displayed so far. Nevertheless, he expects some 'frank exchanges' within the working groups before their reports are finalised and envisages that some recommendations may not be unanimous, which is hardly surprising, given the importance and nature of some of the issues they have to confront.

For example, the agriculture working group, in coming to grips with the massive problems of salinity, erosion and acid soils, will have to consider whether ecological sustainability requires an end to cropping in some areas and reductions in stock numbers — possibly even complete destocking — in others.

Any such recommendation would have major ramifications involving the livelihoods of the farmers involved and of business people who provide services to them, with changes in rural life-style, not to mention demands on government for compensation.

Dr Green sees 'economic instruments' (preferably incentives rather than penalties) as an important means of bringing about necessary changes in agricultural land use. He suggests that we need a tax regime

that rewards management strategies that preserve the land: again, easily said but hard to come to grips with in practice.

For agriculture, at least the facts about the state of the land and the way it is used, which the working group needs as a starting point, are generally available. But for fisheries the information needed to set sustainable catch limits — on the size of fish stocks, 'recruitment' rates and so on — is severely lacking. In coming up with recommendations aimed at ending Australia's sorry sequence of collapses of over-exploited fisheries, the working group will be looking for efficient ways to improve the data-base and to implement conservatively set catch quotas.

Despite the prominence of forests in environmental controversy, Dr Green suspects the forestry working group will have less difficulty than the other two he chairs in setting a course towards ecological sustainability. He foresees short-term problems in maintaining the forest industries without adversely affecting the native forests. In 20 or 30 years, however, he expects plantations and restricted areas of intensively managed forest will provide most of Australia's timber needs, dramatically reducing the demand for logging in other areas.

As a sign of the high priority it has given the sustainable development exercise, the government has arranged monthly meetings between the three group chairs and the Ministers mainly concerned with the issues under examination. (Professor Stuart Harris of the Australian National University heads the groups on energy production, manufacturing and mining and Professor David Throsby of Macquarie University those on transport, energy and tourism.)

The reports of the nine working groups will take a common approach — setting out 'where we are now' and 'where we need to be' to achieve sustainability, comparing the two and then providing conclusions and recommendations. The tenth report will deal with issues that span the industry sectors. In its 80–100 pages, each report will set out the key issues, offer practical policy approaches and identify as accurately as possible what costs will have to be faced.