



MIA HANDSHIN | Welcome Speech

2015 EPA Environment and Community Groups Forum

Tuesday 9 June 2015

We pay our respects to the Kaurna people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and acknowledge their deep spiritual attachment and relationship to this country.

The Hon Ian Hunter MLC, Minister for the Environment and Sustainability

Ladies and gentlemen

Welcome to the 2015 EPA Environment and Community Groups Forum.

As Presiding Member of the EPA Board I'm delighted you've accepted our invitation to be here.

As are my board colleagues; Linda Bowes, Rob Fowler, Allan Holmes, Mark Withers, Helen MacDonald, Ros De Garis, CE of the EPA Tony Circelli.

To guide us through this afternoon, we have invited the wise, warm and ever witty Denise Picton, Managing Director of Oztrain, to act as our facilitator. Thanks in advance to you Denise.

The EPA exists to ensure a better environment for the wellbeing and prosperity of all South Australians. As the state's independent environment protection regulator our goal is to ensure good quality land, water, air, safe use of radiation, protection from unacceptable noise and sustainable use of resources.

Twenty years ago this May, the EPA was established, in the words of the Minister of the day, 'to work positively and constructively with industry **and community** to achieve cost effective pollution prevention, waste reduction and management'

That's why we are here today.

This forum is one of several on the Board's annual engagement program including a summit with business and industry, a regional consultation and a roundtable with local government later this year.

The Board has chosen to host this year's forum with a focus on the northwestern suburbs because there are a number of emerging environmental issues here that are high on the EPA's radar, a unique concentration of EPA licensees and a relatively well-engaged community, judging by the number of active environment groups in the area.

My appreciation to Mark Withers and his team at the City of Charles Sturt for hosting us and also for supporting EPA staff with our guest list for today. Because in addition to a number of valued representatives of key stakeholder groups from across the state, this year we've also invited several residents and members of local community and environment groups.

A warm welcome to those of you who've not been involved before. We sincerely value the new perspectives you'll offer today.

Following last year's forum, we heard participants say loud and clear that you need more time to talk, and less from EPA people. You will note that there is a board member or two and a staff representative at each of your tables. However, they are there to actively listen and have been asked to refrain from getting involved in the discussion unless there is a specific question you want answered. You will hear from the EPA CE at the conclusion of the forum when he will reflect our understanding of what you've shared with us. And as always, we will prepare a report of what's been said and what we will do in response.

We take the time to engage with you, not just because the Act requires us to, but because through working with you, we are better able to understand and address emerging environmental issues, particularly those in your backyards.

So thank you for taking the time to be here.

The overarching theme of today's forum is *Tough Conversations, Active Engagement*.

Making a table selection on arrival, you will have noted that we've developed a series of questions to explore this theme and draw out your views on:

- the major issues currently impacting on your suburb
- how you perceive the role of the EPA
- what you expect from the EPA
- what we (EPA and community) could be doing together to ensure we hand our environment in a good state to future generations
- what you think the EPA is doing well and what we can do better
- actions the community can take to better support the work of the EPA and
- what the community expects from the EPA when communicating on potential public health matters.

The reality is that from time to time, the EPA's role is to facilitate some tough conversations with the community.

Whether about site contamination, air quality, noise or issues relating to the operations of a licensee, when there's a potential impact on your neighbourhood, your home, your health and that of your families, anxiety is highly likely. It is the EPA's job to respond with sensitivity, instilling trust and offering reassurance while providing authoritative expertise based on sound but sometimes still-evolving and often quite complex science.

The SA EPA has invested years in honing its ability to tackle these tough conversations effectively. This is a challenge for EPAs worldwide. We are all being called to be both technically excellent in environmental science and regulation, as well as exceptional in engaging, communicating and meeting the changing needs of community who expect more and better services, faster, better regulation applied consistently, effectively and efficiently.

In the past 12 months the SA EPA has had some notable opportunities to build on existing approaches to communications and engagement and further refine the way we convey information about potential health risks without sparking unwarranted fear in the community.

In the case of TCE contamination in the southwestern suburbs of Clovelly Park and Mitchell Park, the establishment of a community reference group revealed that community expectations are evolving when it comes to communication about such matters.

Whereas in the past, the EPA has worked to ensure that potentially affected South Australians are the first to be notified of the EPA's analysis of testing results, face to face, by our scientists, it became clear through CP that people want to be informed about results even before the expert analysis is finalized. In other words, even when there is still some uncertainty about what the raw data means and therefore, before decisions are made about what action is required.

Ultimately as a result of this 'tough conversation' and the active engagement that occurred, there has been an evolution in the EPA's approach. We've rapidly closed the gap between our protocols and practices and community expectations. We are committed to continuous improvement and to walking closely 'with' community members throughout the process of assessment in complex cases to ensure you know what we know, when we know it.

In his speech to last year's EPA Forum, the CE of the Conservation Council Craig Wilkins talked about the consultation fatigue he was observing and noted that a number of environment groups formed in the 1970s and 80s are coming to the natural end of their life. Craig expressed a belief that mainstream community has 'stopped listening'.

He urged a rethink about the way we do things in response to this trend, noted the evolution of social movements and the imperative of community 'stepping up' in new ways to ensure environmental issues are kept in sharp focus.

Recently while on an interstate flight I was quizzed by my seat-row companion about the highest priority environmental challenges facing our state. We talked about legacy contamination and major sources of pollution, waste, increasing urban and infrastructure development, climate change, the impacts of mining. But above all, the conversation honed in on the challenge of building community confidence and trust, and cultivating more widespread interest in environmental protection. We concluded that the key for us is to cut through to more South Australians with the message that 'we are all in this together' when it comes to environmental protection.

You may have seen an article in the weekend newspaper bearing this theme out. Recent research shows that the environment is apparently far lower on the list of priorities of a majority than it was a decade ago. Cost of living, health care, terrorism and the economy now top the list for many people.

The EPA has been a clear voice in reframing old notions of competition between the economy and the environment in SA. We contribute to the achievement of state government priorities which put the environment at the centre and we are at the forefront of ensuring the win-win-win that we need in social, environmental and economic terms in order to achieve the best possible version of our state's future.

It would seem, however, that environmental protection is, in fact, a 'tough conversation' to be having with the wider community right now.

It's clear that we need to continue our efforts to generate fresh understanding about the role of the EPA, it's contribution and benefit to our state, so that we can strengthen support for and confidence in what we do.

But at the heart of the EP Act is the clear recognition that this 'environmental protection' thing works best when there is partnership between and investment by the community in the EPA. We need engaged citizens to help as our eyes and ears, reporting on issues of environmental significance, working with us, holding us to account. So we need to find new ways to mobilize and enlist people.

The reporting of illegally dumped asbestos in Mutton Cove via our hotline in March shone a light on the interface between the EPA and local government in serving the community on matters of environment protection and prompted a comprehensive review of EPA protocols and policies to improve **our service delivery**, ensure that we meet the highest of standards and become an exemplar in government.

A big part of this is about providing better online services. **That's why, on May 1, the EPA launched its new website.**

It's now far easier to read on all devices with an improved search function. Information, advice and news relating to environmental issues happening in our State, and in your backyard is better formatted and much easier to find.

We know that improving accessibility to information has the potential to increase participation, responsibility and environmental leadership and we want to encourage more South Australians to become active, engaged environmental citizens.

The EPA is now also an active voice on Twitter...*And I welcome you to Tweet using the hashtag SA EPA FORUM*

Speaking of social media, how many of you have seen the 'nature is speaking' campaign currently being conducted by Conservation International?

This is a stunning series of 2-minute films featuring breathtaking natural scenes with the 'voices of nature' narrated by Hollywood stars including Julia Roberts, Harrison Ford and Robert Redford. The films are clear and compelling messages about the importance of the environment to our existence on the planet!

They are a potent way of leveraging the power of community via new media to capture hearts and minds, with the campaign securing hundreds of thousands of shares and likes, reconnecting millions of people with the reality these films portray. The more the word is spread, the more funds CI raises because this campaign is an innovative partnership with a multinational IT company donating \$1 for every share or retweet.

Of course, we don't have access to big bucks and international film stars. And the EPA must remain focused on our substantial day job!

But in order to cut through the 'tough conversation' about environmental protection, I believe that a new kind of collaboration will be necessary to re-engage the disengaged and re-inspire the somewhat-engaged but increasingly disheartened.

This opportunity needs to be at the very heart of the conversation about what the EPA and the community/environment movements can do together. And young people in particular will be instrumental in taking this conversation to the next level.

We do listen to you. As agreed at last year's Forum, you'll see that your views are reflected in the **EPA's new Strategic Directions** launched in May. You'll find a copy on your table to take away with you. The three **objectives that we have identified for the EPA over the coming three years are to:**

- **Support wellbeing and prosperity;**
- **Keep people informed and engaged;**
- And, as an **Effective and Trusted Regulator**, we will **build trust and confidence and** maximise the potential of our people.

In summary, the big change for us is the **way** we are doing our business to meet changing community expectations.

And that's where the conversation we are about to have comes in.

Helping us to better understand those expectations, identifying new ways of rising to the challenges and working with you more effectively to ensure a better environment for the wellbeing and prosperity of all South Australians.

Thank you for being part of this important conversation.

I'm delighted to welcome to the podium Minister the Hon Ian Hunter MLC to officially open the forum.