

Commonwealth Environment Protection Agency

National Pollutant Inventory

Public Discussion Paper  
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Summary

The Prime Minister, in his 21 December 1992 "Statement on the Environment" (AGPS 1992), announced that the Commonwealth Government will establish a legislated National Pollutant Inventory (NPI), in cooperation with State and Territory governments. The Commonwealth has committed \$5.9 million over the first four years of the program.

Pollutant inventories provide information about toxic or hazardous chemicals being released into the environment. Such inventories can provide a very strong impetus to reduce or prevent pollution at the source, through the general availability of information to communities for planning and other purposes. Pollutant inventories have been established in North America and Europe. The best known example is the United States Toxic Release Inventory. Other countries with established or pending inventories include the Netherlands, Norway, Canada and the United Kingdom. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as a follow up to the 1992 United Nations Conference in Rio, is developing guidelines on establishing inventories.

The proposed NPI for Australia will be an information system, providing an annual report of major pollutants and wastes released to the environment. This system is planned to provide easily accessible information to the community on a regular basis.

The objectives of the inventory are:

- \* to provide information to enhance and facilitate policy formulation and decision making for environmental planning and management,
- \* to satisfy community right to know needs, by providing publicly accessible and available information, on a geographic basis, about the pollutants and wastes that are being released into the environment, especially those of a toxic or hazardous nature,
- \* to promote and facilitate waste minimisation and cleaner production programs for industry and government;
- \* to assist Australia in meeting international obligations, and
- \* to assist in identifying priority contaminants entering the environment.

The exact structure and organisation of information gathering for the NPI have yet to be determined. One possibility is the collection of information by the relevant State or Territory, followed by national or central collating and processing. Such information could then be available locally as part of a geographical information system. Reporting to governments would be voluntary for an initial period but would subsequently become mandatory. Information

would be presented to governments regularly and made available through print and computer media.

Six information modules are proposed for the inventory. They are:

1. annual reports of releases of specified hazardous and toxic materials from secondary industries and government facilities;
2. pollutant release information derived from existing licence arrangements;
3. five yearly reports on urban transport and photochemical smog related emissions;
4. solid (non-hazardous) wastes;
5. scheduled ('intractable') wastes; and
6. greenhouse gas emissions.

Module 1 is the substantial new component in the NPI. Most of the other modules are already funded through other programs.

The concept for Module 1 (Hazardous and Toxic Materials) is patterned broadly on the US model. A critical component of the final design of this module will be the criteria which determine which companies or facilities will need to report. Such reporting criteria may include:

- \* a selected list of priority chemicals (for Australia, 50 to 70 may be appropriate initially);
- \* secondary manufacturing industries, including government facilities; and
- \* companies consuming more than 11 tonnes of a chemical per year from the listed chemicals and employing more than 10 people.

The reporting criteria finally selected would determine the number of reports generated annually. These criteria could be varied for Australia to ensure a manageable NPI, initially generating between 3000 and 3800 returns annually from industry.

Various community interests will be represented on an NPI Reference Group, to be established as part of the NPI. The purpose of this group will be to provide input on the parameters of the NPI, and to assist in establishing and implementing the NPI. ,

The NPI is expected to be supported by legislation, with voluntary participation in the preliminary stages. Such legislation could be developed either by the Commonwealth alone or backed by State and Territory legislation paralleling the Commonwealth's. Key provisions in such legislation might include community right-to-know; protection of commercial confidentiality; annual returns; reporting and data handling protocols; availability of data to the public; and requirements to report to Parliament.

The NPI is expected to generate a number of benefits to the following sectors of the community:

- \* the public, by improving access to information;

\* the Commonwealth Government, by being better able to meet international obligations and national planning commitments;

\* State and Territory governments, by providing access to information that will enhance planning and focusing on priority areas for regulatory, enforcement and monitoring efforts;

\* industry, by providing an incentive to cleaner production with resultant cost savings;

\* environmental and community advocacy groups, by providing more detailed government-monitored environmental information; and

\* research and professional organisations, by providing access to more environmental data gathered in a consistent and regulated manner.

Preliminary estimates of the NPI operating costs are \$1.9 million to establish the hazardous and toxic materials module (1), about \$11 000 per facility for industry reporting (average typical cost); about \$0.15 million for the self-monitoring data module, and \$0.15 million for the remaining three modules.

In addition to the intangible benefit to the community from access and use of the data, measurable benefits are expected to flow in terms of potential cost savings to industry estimated in the order of \$40 million, as a result of cleaner production. The anticipated cost savings to industry are expected to more than recoup the estimated annual national cost to industry of participating in the NPI.

In conclusion, the NPI is expected to provide many benefits to the community. Many details have yet to be developed, with the interests of many groups to be considered.

Your considered comments on the various issues raised by this discussion paper are an important part of the consultation process, as community input will be important to the future development of the program. Your submissions on this proposal are invited by 10 June 1994.