HUNTER REGIONAL PLAN

Callicoma Waterfall Carrowbrook Hunter Valley

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INTRODUCTION

This Plan has been prepared by the Hunter Environment Lobby to outline future directions for the improvement of the economic, physical and social environment of the Hunter Region.

The Plan presents a comprehensive package of measures which to ensure sustainable and ecologically compatible development. It identifies the major issues that face the Hunter Region over the coming decades and the means by which these problems may be addressed in land use planning.

The Plan is an update of the HREAP 1995 which was presented to the NSW Government as part of the process of preparing Hunter Regional Environmental Plan 1989. It also takes into account the outcomes of the Hunter Regional Forums held in 2003 and 2004, and the statements agreed. The Plan has been based on an assessment of the resources of the Hunter Region, and the natural and economic constraints which apply. It is primarily concerned with land use constraints.

ISSUES FACING THE HUNTER REGION OVER THE NEXT 20 YEARS

While many of the major issues facing the region are global or national in their context, these require specific local and regional actions if they are to be solved, including land use responses.

The most significant issues to be faced are as follows -

1. Climate change and global warming

There is a need to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other "greenhouse" gases primarily by reducing fossil fuel usage and promoting more energy efficient land use. In addition, there is a need to regulate coastal development, to increase the area of land covered by native forests, and to allow agriculture and natural ecosystems to adapt to projected climatic changes.

Energy consumption must be reduced, and sustainable energy sources (e.g. solar, wind power) utilised. Efficient use of energy produces significant economic benefits as well as reducing environmental impacts.

2. Accessibility and public transport

The existing transport pattern poorly addresses the Hunter Region's dispersed settlement structure and the long term need for efficient transport between and within urban centres. Extreme car dependency makes the region economically vulnerable and inefficient, and is reducing liveability

through congestion and poor air quality. This must be changed through appropriate land use planning and public transport measures.

3. Demographic and employment changes

Population ageing and the progressive transition away from coal mining employment will affect the region's economic and settlement structure. As a consequence, new services will need to be provided, and globally competitive lifestyle and employment opportunities need to be generated to retain residents and attract new skills and economic investment.

4. Biological Diversity

The present biological diversity within the Hunter Region must be protected. Controls must be introduced to ensure that there is no extinction of any plant or animal species or that species and their habitat are not threatened or endangered. There must be a program to retain native habitat and connectivity, to protect significant natural areas in reserves, and to ensure appropriate management of all remaining native vegetation and biodiversity.

5. Land Degradation and contamination

The productive capacity of soils, forests, rivers and water catchment areas must be maintained. Degraded land must be rehabilitated.

Production of toxic waste must be reduced and eventually eliminated. Long term storage or dispersal of toxic waste should not be permitted. All toxic waste which is currently in storage should be reprocessed into substances which are harmless to the environment.

6. Sustainable Agriculture

Agricultural productivity and viability underpins the rural areas of the Hunter Region. Conventional agricultural practices must be reassessed so as to take into account their environmental impact. In particular, use of harmful chemicals must be phased out and alternative practices developed.

7. Re-allocation and rehabilitation of coal mining land

Mining leases and licences in the Hunter Region require comprehensive review, with a view to re-allocating and rationalising areas mined as part of a progressive phase out of the use of non-renewable resources. There should be no new coal mines developed, and the existing mining footprint should not be extended. Progressive rehabilitation and re-use of coal mining

land must be part of any regional plan. Regular monitoring of progress or otherwise on coal affected catchments must be recorded and publicized.

8. Health and Social Issues

Community health and social well being are closely related to environmental conditions, which in turn are tied to the distribution in society of income, wealth and education. There should be a fair distribution of resources, with more emphasis given to environmental education.

9. Sustainable Economy

There is a need to develop a sustainable economic transition to an environmentally desirable future, as identified in this plan. In particular, restructuring of industry needs to take advantage of opportunities presented by new technology and the encouragement of entrepreneurial environmental activities. Use of financial incentives and taxes is a key component of an appropriate economic system.

10. Regional Identity

The region is defined by water catchment and administrative boundaries. However, there is also a regional social identity. This identity must be retained and strengthened so that residents relate to the land and environment where they live, and is a prerequisite for long term sustainable development.

It is important to recognise the special characteristics of the region. These are its industrial and mining base, its significance in energy production, natural and wilderness areas, and expertise in rehabilitation of mined land.

A PLANNING PHILOSOPHY FOR THE HUNTER REGION

Future development within the Hunter Region should meet the following criteria -

1. Long-term Sustainability

Human activities should not interfere with the ability of natural ecosystems to provide benefits (of whatever kind) to society indefinitely. Such a strategy would also generally correspond with the most efficient use of resources.

2. Minimal Environment Impact

Consumption of non-renewable energy should be minimised. Pollution should be minimised and resources recycled to the maximum extent consistent with available technology. There should also be incentives to improve technology and management practices.

3. Environmental Assessment of Activities

Rigorous environmental and health assessment must take place before decisions are made which may affect the environment. The environmental assessment process should include adequate provision for public comment and also education.

4. Enforcement of Environmental Laws and Standards

Environmental laws and standards must be made more stringent, and compliance must be enforced. A public program of monitoring of environmental quality is essential in order that the achievement of objectives is measured.

5. Economic Production

The worth of economic production should be measured by its real benefit to the community, and not simply by private monetary returns. Development should as far as possible have a favourable benefit/ cost ratio in social and environmental terms.

The real cost of environmental damage should be reflected in the market price of goods and services so as to influence consumer demand and market supply. This could be achieved by financial incentives for environmentally appropriate production, or by taxes on goods which have significant environmental costs.

A key economic objective is to maximise and increase the efficiency in the use of resources.

In the long term it may be desirable to aim towards regional self-sufficiency in terms of economic production and consumption.

6. Equitable Distribution of Resources

Development should be consistent with improving the equitable distribution of wealth, income and resources between all members of the community in the Region. In addition, development should be consistent with improving the distribution of wealth to the Hunter Region with respect to other regions of Australia. Currently, the level of wealth in Hunter Region is not commensurate with the level of wealth generated by the Region.

Freehold rights in land must nevertheless be maintained in order to allow fostering of an ethic of long-term land husbandry and protection. Private development rights therefore need to be moderated by obligations to carry out sustainable use and environmental management of land.

7. Maintenance of Diversity

The diversity of land use, biological organisms, natural ecosystems and culture should not be reduced.

All of the above criteria are mutually reinforcing. They form a basis for ensuring that the aims of this plan can be implemented.

PLANNING STRATEGIES

An inter-related set of planning strategies has been formulated. They address the identified planning issues and philosophies and are divided into specific policy areas as follows-

1. Population
2. Economic Development
3. Land Use and Settlement
4. Natural Resources
5. Nature Conservation
6. Transport
7. Health and Community Services
8. Education
9. Environment Protection

1. Population

(a) Definition:

The number of people living in and utilising the region.

(b) Objectives:

- There should be a limitation on population growth, based on the environmental capacity of the region and the maintenance of environmental standards, while acknowledging that consumption of resources needs to be the rule in setting limits.

- There should be a progressive stabilisation of population to a sustainable level. In the meantime, any increase in population should coincide with an equivalent decrease in the per capita environmental impact, so that there is no overall increase in environmental deterioration. The 2010 levels of environmental degradation should be a base against which future population increases should be measured.

(c) Policies:

- The resident population of the region should not exceed a maximum of 700,000 people, or if it does, decrease environmental degradation.

- There is a need to accommodate overspill of population from the Sydney Region, but environmental objectives must not be compromised.

(d) Implementation:

- Further ongoing research to determine the regional carrying capacity.

- Monitoring and documentation of the existing environmental condition of the region.

- Financial incentives to encourage smaller families, and user pays charges for environmental resources.

- Education, provision of economic and social security.

2. Economic Development

(a) Definition:

Economic development relates to the financial and entrepreneurial aspects of production of goods and services, including policy for employment, taxation, incentives, and penalties.

(b) Objectives:

- All new development must be carbon neutral.

- All economic development will be subject to environmental assessment.

- Priority will be given to economic development utilising regional resources.

- Priority will be given to development directly seeking to produce for the local region.

- Priority will be given to the integration of industry with other uses such as community services and housing.

- Economic development is to be subject to environmental constraints and must generate no environmental costs, and meet the other objectives outlined in the plan.

(c) Policies:

- No new industry will be allowed to generate any waste products which cannot be fully recycled using known technologies. Existing industries

will be required to progressively implement full recycling of waste over 15 years.

- Manufacturers of products are to be made legally responsible for the environmental impact of the use of their product from the time of production to final disposal or recycling.

- Small-scale home-based low-impact enterprises will be allowed in any location.

- Concessions will be granted to industries re-using waste products.

- Responsible corporate citizens will seek to promote economic development which -

  - produces products which last well and can be repaired locally;

  - can be safely disposed of in the environment;

  - utilise renewable natural resources;

  - are skill intensive;

  - utilise the best of high and low technologies.

- Encouragement of firms investing in environmentally desirable activities within the region, through rating and taxing concessions.

- There is a need to recognise and to build upon the natural advantages of the region (location, expertise in land management and rehabilitation, energy technology, tourism, national parks and wilderness areas).

  The following commercial opportunities are seen to exist-

  - further processing and value added to raw materials produced locally;

  - healthy food production and marketing;

  - arts and crafts;

  - renewable energy technologies (both development and utilisation);

  - recycling;

  - ecologically sustainable tourism

  - land rehabilitation

- Taxation and financial incentives to promote local industry and technology.

(d) Implementation:

- Readjustment of corporations law, rating and taxation to provide financial incentives for environmentally preferable activities.

- Active incentives (eg tax concessions) for employment in environmentally sustainable activities, especially in alternative energy technology and land rehabilitation and management.

- Establishment of a regional economic development agency with suitable representation of environmental interests, to ensure that economic development priorities fully take into account environmental priorities.

3. Land Use, Housing and Settlement

(a) Definition:

Land is needed for production of primary products, residential settlement, transport and other economic development.

(b) Objectives:

- In conjunction with the strategies for other policy areas to accommodate the Hunter Region's need for land.

- To identify priorities for land use based on the capability of the land to accommodate land use without adverse environmental impact.

- To ensure new buildings are carbon neutral and in urban areas that new buildings and infrastructure do not contribute towards urban heating in summer.

(c) Policies:

- In all new building approvals, local government authorities should be required to make an energy assessment of each new building constructed as part of the normal approval process.

- New dwellings shall be constructed of environmentally acceptable building materials which are recyclable. An evaluation of the likely health and environmental impacts of a proposed building is to be made prior to formal approval.

- All new urban subdivision of land shall result in the creation of allotments which permit correct orientation for energy-efficient housing design.

- There shall be upgrading of public transport services and promotion of forms of travel which minimise the need for private cars. In conjunction with such action there will be complementary locational policies for land use and settlement which increase the accesibility of employment, retailing and recreation services by bus and rail services. Locational policies will thus seek linear and multiple-nucleated location patterns rather than dispersed location patterns which encourage further use of private cars.

- Higher density urban development shall be encouraged so as to achieve more efficient use of land. New residential development should attempt to dramatically increase the amount of employment, retail and recreation services which are within walking or cycling distance of people's home.

- Local environmental plans controlling land use are to be amended to allow multiple use land use zonings so as to allow a greater range of uses in residential areas, subject to strict environmental acceptance criteria.

- Coal fired power stations within the region are to be phased out by 2040 and development incentives are to be provided to support carbon neutral development projects.

(d) Implementation:

- Criteria are to be developed for assessing healthy and environmentally acceptable buildings.

- Restrictions shall be placed on the amount of land area in urban situations that can be covered in hard, non permeable surfaces. Taxes shall apply in urban areas based on the proportion of the site that is covered in hard surfaces.

- Promotion of energy efficient housing designs through payment of grants and encouraging assessment of energy efficiency by local government authorities.

- No additional land to be rezoned for urban development along the coastline.

4. Natural Resources

(a) Definition:

These are resources provided by the environment and utilised by human activities for economic and social benefits. There are two fundamentally distinct categories of natural resources -

(i) Renewable resources - water, forests, fisheries, rangelands. In theory at least, these are fully renewable if managed properly.

(ii) Non-renewable resources - coal, gravel, other minerals, soil.

(b) Objectives:

- Sustainable use of renewable resources shall be progressively phased in.

- More efficient use of non-renewable resources shall be implemented. Appropriate pricing of non-renewable resources will be introduced as a means to ensure greater efficiency is achieved.

(c) Policies:

- There will be no further construction of large water storage dams within the Hunter Region. River and aquifer health will be monitored regularly and minimum standards adhered to by corporations and water users.

- A programme of reaforestation of cleared marginal or steep agricultural land with species indigenous to the locality will be introduced, together with financial incentives to undertake this work.

- There will be no further logging works (including logging and roads) in old growth native forests on private or Crown timber land.

- There will be no mining or resource extraction within national parks, nature reserves or State Forests.

- Approval of mining proposals will require guarantees that the land will be fully reinstated upon completion of mining (including filling and rehabilitation of final voids).

- Stabilisation of coal production within the Region will be achieved by ensuring that new mines are opened, and existing mine extensions occur only after existing mines are worked out and satisfactorily rehabilitated.

- Within each individual State Forest area there shall be no more timber cut in any 10 year period than can be sustainably produced from that forest over that same period.

- There shall be no grazing leases issued in State Forests.

- There shall be a complete review of nature conservation strategies within State Forests and on Crown Lands to assess additional areas which should be protected within the national park estate. The following areas should be protected as national park -

  (i) Chichester and Masseys Creek State Forests in the Upper Paterson and Allyn River valleys;

  (ii) Pokolbin State Forest;

(iii) Crown lands at Awaba in Lake Macquarie LGA identified as a future conservation area.

- The Hunter Region should be promoted and funded as a centre of renewable energy technology. This would provide an ultimate transition of employment for the existing fossil fuel-dependent workforce.

- Less wasteful husbandry of State Forest timber resources, including better utilisation of timber wastes.

- Programs for revegetation of river and stream banks with native indigenous vegetation.

(d) Implementation:

- Appropriate accounting and pricing of timber products taking into account real costs and values.

- Undertake a review of public land within the region and its conservation value, and whether the land should be reserved and managed for nature conservation.

5. Nature Conservation

(a) Definition:

Relates to the need to preserve natural systems, species and features in perpetuity for their own sake and for the potential benefits they may produce. Natural ecosystems also provide a buffer of natural resources for coping with future environmental changes.

(b) Objectives:

- The present natural diversity of species and systems will be retained.

- Existing natural areas outside the National Park system will not be disturbed except where it can be demonstrated by appropriate assessment that harvesting can take place in perpetuity on a sustained yield basis and where no adverse ecological changes will be introduced to the system.

- As far as possible, natural areas will be allowed to expand so that, by the year 2050, not less than 40% of the Hunter Region as a whole is managed to retain, as far as possible its natural indigenous ecosystems. Of rural land, not less than 25% of each farm holding shall be managed primarily for nature conservation purposes. These responsibilities would be transferable from one farm holding to another.

- Clearing controls should be imposed on native vegetation and plans of management progressively prepared to encourage appropriate management.

(c) Policies:

- New nature reserves will be established at Cranky Corner, the Warkworth Sands area and in additional rainforest remnants along the Liverpool Range.

- There will be a consolidation of the boundaries of existing national parks so the boundaries are suitable for management purposes and ecologically appropriate.

- The highest priority land use for vacant Crown land will be nature conservation.

- Priority will be given to the conduct of research which will document the natural systems and species within the region, and support appropriate management.

(d) Implementation:

- Progressively, legal agreements and land management plans will be made by land owners to ensure sustainable management of natural resources. This should be co-ordinated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

- Establish a regional development fund to buy back land for acquisition for conservation purposes.

- Financial concessions (such as local government rate relief, land tax relief) will be given to encourage protection of natural ecosystems on private land.

- Funding is to be sought to document and compile a list of all remnant natural vegetation within the region, in conjunction with a survey of endangered fauna.

- In local environmental plans development consent is to be required for forestry activities and land disturbance in all areas identified as having significant natural ecosystems.

- Appropriate wilderness areas should be proclaimed in all major national parks.

6. Transport

(a) Definition:

This is the need to move people, goods and services and to provide a communication system.

(b) Objectives:

- To develop a transport system which progressively reduces dependence on fossil fuels.
- To reduce the need for transport as far as possible through land use and settlement location policies.
- To reduce and to minimise the environmental impact of transport and communication systems.

(c) Policies:

- "Traffic calming" strategies will be adopted to reduce the environmental impact of cars on residential areas.
- There will be no new main roads constructed.
- Complete bicycle networks will be provided for all urban areas with more than 10,000 people.
- For short distances use of motor cars (other than solar electrically powered vehicles) will be discouraged.
- To establish an hourly passenger rail service on the Hunter Line to link in with local bus services.

(d) Implementation:

- Support for environmentally friendly transport technologies to be funded by increasing fuel taxes on non-renewable energy sources to a real cost level.
- Establishment of the Hunter LinkRail (Cockle Creek - Kurri Kurri – Maitland) rail connection for passenger and freight services. The route to generally follow existing coal mining rail lines.
- Protect a suitable corridor for an East Coast High Speed Rail network through the Hunter Region.

7. Health and Community Services

(a) Definition:

Health is an environmental issue because the health of the population is primarily determined by the condition of the environment. Health also relates

to the ability of the population to cope with the physical environment and with social and economic circumstances.

(b) Objectives:

- To minimise the social and economic costs of health care by minimising environmental contamination by toxic substances or virulent organisms, by adopting practices in industry and transportation which reduce exposure to hazard and by giving preventative health measures priority over acute care.

(c) Policies:

- Community education of environmental health issues.
- There will be a progressive program of eliminating all sources environmental contamination by toxic substances, through waste reprocessing and adoption of appropriate technologies.
- Priority is to be given to studies of environmentally related health issues.

(d) Implementation:

- Establishment of a regional environmental health unit to research and develop environmental health programs, to concentrate on preventative health.
- Promote independent research and public information into air quality and health impacts of coal mining and use of diesel fuel in the Hunter Region.

8. Education

(a) Definition:

Relates to community understanding of environmental problems and attitudes, and provides skills necessary to adapt to, cope with and create new and innovative solutions and research.

(b) Objectives:

- To ensure that the public understands the environmental problems faced by the community and can respond in positive ways.

(c) Policies:

- More community-based education with curriculum determined by local community needs and skills.

- More concentration on processes and logic and on personal lifestyle development and practical skills.

(d) Implementation:

- Increased priority to be given to courses at all levels in environmental assessment and management.

- Development of local educational/research expertise in land rehabilitation and management.

- Sponsorship of scholarships/research on regional subjects of environmental priority.

- Introduction of a regional environmental education program and curriculum into all schools in the region, with a regional focus.

9. Environment Protection

(a) Definition:

Relates to the quality of the physical environment necessary for life, notably air quality, water quality, food quality, noise and the assessment of natural and environmental hazards.

(b) Objectives:

- To achieve air, soil and water free from any harmful contamination.

- To adequately assess environmental hazards before any development or activity is carried out.

- To regularly carry out environmental audits.

- To minimise noise levels as far as possible and to ensure that noise levels do not result in harmful effects.

- To set a timetable for the elimination of man-made toxic substances from the environment.

- To prevent an increase in the level of emissions of sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxides, and to reduce 1992 emissions levels by 20 per cent by the year 2000.

- To upgrade environmental monitoring and enforcement.

(c) Policies:

- No new development will be approved where there is any possibility of release of toxic or potentially hazardous substances, unless the proposal represents an improvement to an existing operation.

- New development must demonstrate a net beneficial environmental impact.

- Offenders against pollution, pesticides and hazardous chemicals legislation will be personally and criminally liable.

(d) Implementation:

- Establishment of an independent regional environmental monitoring/land information data bank.

- Survey and monitoring of all existing and former waste disposal sites and preparation of a strategy for ensuring adequate future control to prevent contamination.

- Regional state of the environment reports to be prepared annually.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES

Significant administrative adjustment is required to implement the strategies. Aspects of this which require particular attention are -

1. Administrative change
2. Improvement of information available to the public
3. Public education and media
4. Budget and taxation priorities
5. Public participation and the political process
6. User pays principle
7. Personal Responsibility

1. Administrative Change

A regional Environmental Authority will be established with a specific charter to -

- Control and ultimately eliminate all forms of pollution.

- To ensure the implementation of sustainable land management practices.

- To undertake research and public education.

- To closely liaise with local government in relation to its role as a development approval authority under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979.

A regional Public Transport Authority will be established with a specific charter to -

- Increase the frequency and connectivity of train services within the region, to underpin a linked network of public transport.

- Actively reduce the use of private cars in urban areas of the region.

- Support the use of bicycles in connection with public transport (especially rail).

- Participate in land use planning and development decision-making to ensure that land use and transport planning are complementary and meet the needs of regional users.

- Monitor and report on regional transport provision and needs, and progress towards the objective of achieving a carbon neutral transport system.

2. Improvement of Information and Accountability

Present policies are based primarily on past practices, many of which are plainly inappropriate for the future and which are not based on substantial research, including many myths.

Environmental research which is appropriate to the region needs to be fostered through public and private institutions, especially in higher education and industry. It is proposed that a regional environmental research fund be established specifically to identify and rectify deficiencies in present knowledge.

There is a need for more accurate measurement of environmental conditions and changes and especially to assess the environmental costs of economic decisions.

3. Public Education and Media

Public education and creation of links between government organisations, community groups and the media needs to form an important part in any environmental strategy.

4. Budget Priorities

All organisations should be required, through their financial accounting procedures, to identify (though not necessarily to quantify) the environmental costs and benefits of their activities. This should form part of auditing requirements, with an ultimate aim

that any activities incurring environmental costs will suffer taxation penalties sufficient to meeting the social cost of rectifying the damage. Conversely, environmental benefits will be granted financial advantages.

5. Public Participation and the Political Process

The co-operation needed to implement beneficial environmental change implies an accountable and responsive government. This itself implies that many innovations are required to the political process to improve public participation in decision making.

6. User Pays Pricing of Resources

The principle of the "user pays" must be implemented more widely, especially in the pricing of electricity and fossil fuels. Concurrently with the introduction of user pays pricing, there needs to be a public information program to explain the desirability and environmental virtue of an equitably-applied user pays pricing system.

7. Personal Responsibility

The principle of personal responsibility and liability for environmental degradation needs to be incorporated into financial and legal arrangements. This will ensure that the costs of environmental impacts can be borne by those that generate them.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITIES AND PRIORITIES

The priorities for action are as follows:

1. Immediately stop further destruction (eg immediate clearing controls and energy taxes)

2. Change current economic practices to only allow environmentally sustainable economic growth

3. Rectify and restore existing environmental damage

Priority responsibilities for the various levels of government are as follows:

Federal

- Imposition of energy taxes
- Economic restructuring to encourage environmentally sustainable activities
- Constitutional amendments to legally recognise the idea of environmental rights

- Grants to encourage research, acquisition of land and appropriate management to protect biodiversity

State

- Measures to promote reafforestation of land with native species
- Requiring energy efficient, carbon neutral design for all new buildings
- Incorporation of the principles and policies outlined in this plan into a regional environmental plan made under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act
- Ensuring more ecologically appropriate boundaries for existing national parks
- Establishment of a regional decision making framework to ensure full assessment of environmental impacts of development and change
- Promotion of measures to protect biodiversity
- Promotion of research, investment and job creation in renewable energy, and other technologies that can support a transition to new employment opportunities.
- Promotion

Establishment of a Hunter based Regional Independent Scientific Committee (RISC). This Committee would be an independent scientific and technical panel with administrative support. This would be funded by rates or levies on development (eg 1 cent per tonne of coal produced from the region = $800,000 per annum). The Committee should be linked to research centres such as the University of Newcastle.

The 2004 Forum reaffirmed the need for a regional environmental monitoring program independent of industry, and the lack of reliable information on environmental health. Better regional systems are necessary to be able to identify cumulative impacts. A number of funding options are available to pay for the cost of monitoring

Local

- Giving rate concessions for environmentally desirable land use such as retention of native vegetation
- Implementation of user pays principle for all activities with a significant environmental impact (eg garbage disposal, water, sewerage, roads)
- Requiring energy efficient design for all new buildings given approval
- Properly implementing and enforcing existing planning controls

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