



**Aboriginal Water and Environmental Advisory Group
Meeting No 8 – 19 October 2021**

Communique

The Aboriginal Water and Environmental Advisory Group (AWEAG) held its eight meeting on Tuesday 19 July 2021 at Prime House in Joondalup. the Department of Water and Environment (the Department) office in Geraldton. Ms Michelle Andrews, Director General of the Department, chaired the meeting.

Main items presented and discussed include the following:

State Government Aboriginal Engagement Directorate and Key Initiatives

Ms Tracey Ninnette, Director of the Department of Premier and Cabinet's Aboriginal Engagement Directorate, outlined the structure of the Aboriginal Engagement Directorate and provided an overview of the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy and Closing the Gap WA Implementation Plan and the 17 socioeconomic targets. The Directorate is seeking to work in partnership with other agencies to deliver goals set out in the Strategy and Plan. Members discussed how government can best facilitate partnerships with Aboriginal people.

Single Use Plastics

Mr Chris Ryan provided an overview of WA's accelerated plan to phase out certain single use plastics (and a description of items proposed for banning in WA).

In 2019, the Department released the "Let's not draw the short straw – reduce single-use plastics issues paper for consultation". Over 9,500 responses were received. In response to consultation feedback the State Government released "Western Australia's Plan for Plastics". The plan's preferred approach is avoidance of single-use plastics to mitigate the known impacts of single-use plastics on the environment and waste streams.

Guest visitor Professor Matthew Tonts, Chair of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Professor Tonts provided an overview of the role and functions of the EPA and sought advice from members on how the EPA can best engage with AWEAG and members.

Professor Tonts explained that EPA will undertake a review of the "social surroundings" environmental factor guideline (related to the Environmental Protection Act 1986) and this, together with greenhouse gas emissions policy, will form part of focus of the agency policy review in 2022. EPA will consult with members of the AWEAG to seek input and feedback on the review.

Members highlighted the importance of collaboration between traditional owners and scientists in addressing climate change and aligning cultural ecological knowledge and practices with western scientific data for a successful management approach. They also noted the importance of Aboriginal corporations, government and industry working in partnership to manage impact of development on land.



Better Engagement in Water Regulation and Licensing Process with Traditional Owners

DWER is currently undertaking a review of its internal operational policy on native title process in water licensing, with a view to clarifying guidelines for water licensing staff and improving input by native title holders. Ms Susie Williams provided an overview of the Department's water planning, licensing and monitoring process.

The Department is seeking input from members on how to best assist native title holders understand where they can have input into the water licensing process and how their input will be considered. This review will influence the development of the new water resources legislation.

Ms Williams said that the *Rights in Water and Irrigation Act 1914* assessment criteria (part 7(2)) does not explicitly include cultural values. The Group discussed the assessment criteria, challenges associated with notification and advertising (who to notify and when) and the importance of receiving early notification. Members noted the need to map cumulative impacts due to rising sea levels and climate change and for the new legislation to be designed with monitoring of health of ecosystems in mind.

Update and Consultation on Native Vegetation Draft Policy

Mr Richard Newman and Ms Anya Lam outlined the consultation process for the Native Vegetation Draft Policy and provided a summary of Aboriginal stakeholder feedback and main points of interest and concern.

Mr Newman and Ms Lam provided an overview of the design of the draft policy. They noted that Aboriginal people will have future opportunities to engage on local matters through regional planning.

Members discussed areas of interest and regional economic opportunities for regeneration, diversification and carbon offsets and questioned how to ensure that Traditional Owners are equitably rewarded. Members highlighted the importance of seeing the inherent value of vegetation to Aboriginal people. Mr Mathews noted that the ecosystem is regarded as a whole, not fragmented, and have cultural, spiritual, and ecological values Aboriginal people and that there is an obligation to protect the system.

Gnammas

Member Mr Jason Barrow presented information about 'gnammas' which are ancient water storage sites located in rock catchments. These are located throughout the Wheatbelt and are culturally significant to Aboriginal people. Many are currently in a state of disrepair. Members explored how members and government can work together to restore and revitalise these rock holes.