

Principles of Environmental Impact Assessment

Jon Nevill, May 2000

Environment impact assessment (EIA) provides an avenue for the review of the likely environmental effects of proposals or programs, and provides mechanisms to ensure that agreements reached at the stage of project approval are carried through to project operation and closure.

The governing principles of EIA were discussed and subsequently endorsed by the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC October 1991 section 5) as part of the National/State coordination process leading up to government endorsement of the InterGovernmental Agreement on the Environment (IGAE) in February 1992. These principles were further elaborated in subsequent ANZECC reports (listed below).

These principles are consistent with those recommended by the IGAE, the National Strategy on Ecologically Sustainable Development, ANZECC and the Commonwealth Environment Protection Agency (now called the Environment Protection Group). Key references in this regard are listed below under "References".

The principles are:

Participation

The process should include adequate participation of all stakeholders.

Transparency

EIA should be conducted through an established process. All elements of the process should be clearly understood by all participants.

Certainty

The process should have clear objectives, be consistent, and be conducted within agreed time-frames.

Accountability

Decision makers within government need to be able to provide clear and detailed reasons for their decisions to all stakeholders. Appeal provisions to an independent authority should exist. The EIA process should cover the life of the proposal, through project design, construction, operation and finally decommissioning: project operators must be accountable for commitments made during project approval.

Integrity

Decisions need to be based on the best available information, and all relevant factors need to be taken into account by decision-makers. Where impacts are uncertain, outcomes should rely on sound risk assessment and management.

Cost-effectiveness

The process should meet its objectives while imposing the least cost to participants. Accreditation of State government processes by the Commonwealth is a key mechanism for avoiding unnecessary duplication of approval processes.

Flexibility

The process should be able to accommodate proposals varying in type, scope of

impact, and complexity. Flexibility is desirable in terms of the form of EIA process, issues to be addressed, process time-frames, and degree of public participation.

Practicality

The process should recognise community concerns, commercial realities, best practice technology, and scientific uncertainties.

Precautionary

Where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation. Refer to the National Strategy for ESD, and the Rio Earth Summit "Agenda 21" (available on the web) for more details on the use of the precautionary principle.

References:

- ANZECC (1991). **A National Approach to Environmental Impact Assessment in Australia**, Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council, September 1991; and Background Paper, Canberra, October 1991.
- ANZECC (1993). **Basis for a National Agreement on Environmental Impact Assessment**, Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council, Canberra, September 1993.
- ANZECC (1993). **Guidelines and Criteria for Determining the Need for and Level of Environmental Impact Assessment in Australia**, Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council, Canberra, September 1993.
- ANZECC (1996). **Guidelines and Criteria for Determining the Need for and Level of Environmental Impact Assessment in Australia**, Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council, June 1996.
- ANZECC (1997). **Basis for a National Agreement on Environmental Impact Assessment**, Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council, June 1997, Canberra.
- Commonwealth of Australia (Council of Australian Governments) (1992) **Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment**; Australian Government Publishing Service; Canberra.
- Commonwealth of Australia (Council of Australian Governments) (1992) **National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSED)**; Australian Government Publishing Service; Canberra.