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 Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts  
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Dear Secretary,

**Inquiry into climate change and environmental impacts on coastal communities**

In my role as Executive Officer of the Western Port Greenhouse Alliance (see attached), I wish put forward the following comments, arranged in response to the terms of reference, for the consideration of your committee. I would be pleased to expand upon them in an appearance before your committee.

**Existing policies and programs related to coastal zone management, taking in the catchment-coast-ocean continuum**

Members of the community have difficulty understanding which is the responsible authority for various elements of coastal ecosystems. Natural resource management is the responsibility of a plethora of agencies, from a foreshore committee, a local government, a coastal board or a catchment management authority, state agencies such as an environment protection authority, a department of environment or infrastructure or a federal government department such as the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

For those who work in coasts and NRM, there might be clarity borne of experience, but members of the public, whose involvement might be sporadic at best, a significant barrier to being effective participants is uncertainty with whom to deal on such matters. For example, in a recent incident in Western Port, a hovercraft was in active use over low-tide exposed seagrass flats. To whom should the public turn as the responsible authority to report such a matter? If they do report it and no action ensues, how can they pursue accountability?

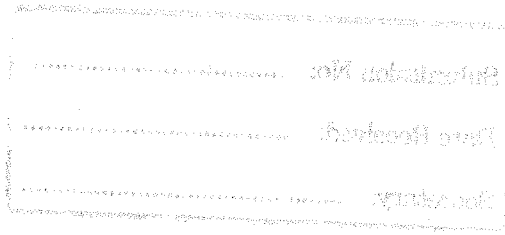
Not knowing how to play a successful role in coastal care and protection can be a significant disincentive. What is needed is a clear allocation of responsibilities by government, explanatory material that sets out these responsibilities and a community engagement program for the many people prepared to become involved to understand these responsibilities and work effectively within them. This comprises an opportunity for government to leverage the significant resources that are allocated to coastal zone management.

**Environmental impacts of coastal population growth and mechanisms to promote sustainable use of coastal resources**

As the eloquent Donald Rumsfeld remarked, there are 'known unknowns'. In this context, one known is that climate change will have significant impact upon the coastal zone. This also provides an unknown, just precisely what those impacts will be. This dictates that we should, at the slightest provocation, invoke the precautionary principle.

**A regional partnership to reduce greenhouse gas emissions**





The 'sea-changers' and others wanting to live beside the coast are prompting large residential developments immediately adjacent to the coast. Dune systems, saltmarshes and estuarine environments, and the biodiversity found within such ecosystems are being compromised. The loss of salt-marsh, for example, could well be a factor in the decline of Orange bellied parrots, while developments such as that at Martha's Cove, without appropriate conditions, could adversely affect native migratory fish such as Tupong.

There has never been a comprehensive community debate as to the value that should be placed on coastal ecosystems and the biodiversity they contain. There is an implicit value placed on such areas – after all people in very large numbers are choosing to live there, yet that very choice places these ecosystems under threat. Until this public debate, authorities are pre-empting the results with the application of planning law that largely omits reference to biodiversity. The EPBC Act, which could be a means of protection of coastal ecosystems, is not well-resourced and its processes appear forbidding to the community.

### **Impact of climate change on coastal areas and strategies to deal with climate change adaptation, particularly in response to projected sea level rise**

The Western Port Greenhouse Alliance is concluding the project *Impacts of Climate Change on Human Settlements in the Western Port Region: An Integrated Assessment*. The project commenced with CSIRO applying their climate models to determine likely biophysical impacts, storm surges, sea level rise, intense rainfall, high winds, extreme temperature and fire weather, around Western Port.

Where council has infrastructure that is located in vulnerable areas and/or provides services that might be compromised by these biophysical impacts, council staff with responsibility for emergency management, environmental health and community care, for example, have identified the precise nature of the risk to which council is exposed. They are identifying the adaptation responses that might be made to mitigate these risks. This data will be available in considerable detail June 30, 2008 and could be the subject of a briefing given in person to the Select Committee.

Through this project, the need for more precise climate modelling and for higher resolution coastal elevation data has become apparent. The digital elevation modelling that is being prepared through the Victorian government Future Coasts project will assist with the latter. What is needed is data linking climate change modelling, elevation data and council's GIS data to allow local government, as the planning authority, greater confidence in meeting their responsibilities.

The increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events is likely to extend the provision of emergency response and recovery services. The modelling in the project cited above predicts a marked increase in intense short-term rainfall events that lead to severe and localised flooding. When this occurs coincident with storm surges and raised sea levels, the impacts of flooding that result will require an emergency response and recovery capacity beyond that which is available currently.

### **Mechanisms to promote sustainable coastal communities**

Communities everywhere, including coastal communities, are aware that there are impending changes as a result of climate change and there is general concern that these changes will not be for the better. While in many cases this concern is realistic, opportunities to receive factual non-sensationalized information and to discuss it with people with knowledge are needed. Change will not occur overnight, not all of the change will be negative and there are many purposeful responses that can be made. It is important that people accept the seriousness of climate change but do not throw up their hands in impotence and disengagement. For this there is a very strong need for community leadership.

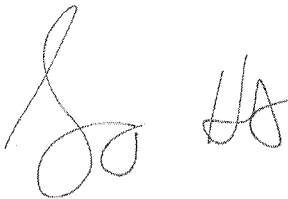
A marked feature of the climate change issue is uncertainty. That we are asked to act when the stimulus for action is clouded in uncertainty is almost counter-intuitive. Our construction of knowledge confers authority on science and facts, yet in this case, our science does not deliver facts, the increasing precision of climate

modelling notwithstanding. Greater degrees of certainty mightn't be available but this cannot stop us responding. Components of the education program therefore must include the limitations of our knowledge and the imperative for action.

### **Governance and institutional arrangements for the coastal zone**

Clear and transparent governance responsibilities need to be determined and then promulgated across the community. With the continuity between catchments, coasts and the ocean, a natural resource management agency with overall responsibility across this continuum is needed. If a single agency is not realistic, formal processes for articulating between responsible agencies will be needed. The social and economic issues bound up with coastal management must be considered here also. Our capacity to manage coastal issues better is compromised by our fragmented and discipline-based approach to them. Whatever governance arrangements are devised, they must approach coastal issues from an interdisciplinary basis.

Yours sincerely



Greg Hunt  
Executive Officer

