

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications  
Legislation Committee**  
Answers to questions on notice  
**Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio**  
Budget Estimates, May 2012

**Program: Division or Agency:** 2.1: EQD **Question No:** 048

**Topic:** Container Deposit Legislation –  
Boomerang Alliance submission

**Proof Hansard Page and Date** 92-93

**or Written Question:** (22/5/12)

**Senator Ludlam asked:**

Senator LUDLAM: ...I put it to you that in the Boomerang Alliance submission—maybe you have it in front of you and maybe you do not—their estimate of the value of unredeemed deposits, the ones that are not returned through the recycling process, is \$1.78 billion out to 2020. Does that figure ring a bell?

...

Dr Wright: No, I do not, but I am familiar with that figure.

Senator LUDLAM: You are aware of the model. Does that number hold water? Do you think it is an accurate reflection of the order of magnitude of unredeemed deposits that could be collected?

Dr Wright: To the extent that the cross-jurisdictional working group has looked at this information, that figure is approximately correct. But it is only if it only holds for the first four years, so it is not an amount that would stay in the kitty for the duration; it would then get used up. It is an early aspect of that particular model.

Senator LUDLAM: Their table—which I have in front of me and will shortly table for the benefit of the committee, because I am going to ask you to either validate it or debunk it for me—shows that in the first couple of years out to 2016 it is not actually collecting very much and after that there is a reasonably steady revenue flow. In the 2020 out year it is up to \$280 million in unredeemed deposits. Why does your reckoning show that that money evaporates after four years?

Dr Wright: I think we would need to take that question on notice because in order to do the explanation justice, so that it is clear, it would be better to follow up in writing. It is actually quite detailed and you have to look at a number of different aspects of the way the Boomerang Alliance model is constructed.

**Answer:**

Under the Boomerang Alliance model unredeemed deposits are available to 'offset scheme costs and support significant additional recycling efforts' (Boomerang Alliance, Submission to Packaging Impacts Consultation Regulation Impact Statement, March 2012, page one).

As shown in figures tabled by Senator Ludlam on 22 May 2012, the Boomerang Alliance estimates that, in the first four years of operation, initial return rates will be from 60 per cent to 75 per cent and hence the amount of unredeemed deposits would exceed the net costs of the scheme.

According to the figures tabled, after year four the Boomerang Alliance estimates that the return rate will rise to 80 per cent and the amount of unredeemed deposits will no longer be sufficient to meet the costs of the scheme. The figures tabled by Senator Ludlam estimated this shortfall in year five at \$17 million.

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**Program: Division or Agency:** 2.1: EQD **Question No:** 049

**Topic:** United Nations Environment  
Programme (UNEP) Global Binding  
Mercury Instrument – International  
negotiations

**Proof Hansard Page and Date** Written

**or Written Question:**

**Senator Heffernan asked:**

1. By being involved in the international negotiations, your Department has already acknowledged that mercury is the most toxic metal/gas in the environment. Do you agree or disagree with this statement and please provide details?
2. SEWPAC is at the negotiation table for the globally binding mercury instrument, they have been funding the research into atmospheric emissions of gaseous mercury in Australia through the chemicals partnership area, they control water and the methylated mercury that bioaccumulates in fish comes through the water flowing from abandoned mine sites. Do you agree or disagree and please provide details?
3. In a letter dated 29 November 2011, your Acting Assistant Secretary Charmayne Murray is quoted as saying “there is no urgent need to remove mercury from gold mines in Australia”. Could you please explain to me why it is that your Department is wasting public funds on the international negotiating process whilst it has a view that the mercury at disused gold mines in Australia does not represent a threat to matters of National Environmental significance?
4. How much money has been spent by your Department on this international negotiating process?

**Answer:**

1. Mercury is highly toxic. The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the department), on behalf of the Australian Government, participates in the international negotiations on a global legally binding instrument on mercury to seek to ensure that Australian interests (including economic, environmental and human health interests) are taken into account.
2. To help inform Australia’s position on the international mercury negotiations, the department has financed a study on ‘Mercury Sources, Transportation and Fate in Australia’ by Macquarie University to obtain new information on the levels and releases of mercury in Australia. The department received the final report in December 2009. The report was provided to the United Nations Environment Programme and is available on their website at:  
<http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Portals/9/Mercury/Documents/para29submissions/Australia-Hg%20inventory.pdf>

3. Mercury arises from many sources in Australia. Participation in the international negotiation process is important to ensure that Australian interests (including economic, environmental and human health interests) are taken into account.

The quote referenced in this question was provided in response to a request by Hg Recoveries, under section 158 of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act), that mercury recovery projects across Australia be exempted from consideration under national environment law. It was determined on 29 November 2011 that such an exemption would fail to meet the 'national interest' test stipulated in section 158 and that an exemption would therefore not be granted.

The referenced letter responds to the claim by Hg Recoveries that the need to remove mercury from disused gold mines was of such urgency that it constituted grounds for an exemption in the national interest. The full quote in the letter reads "there is no urgent need to remove mercury from disused gold mines in Australia [as to do so] allows a significant impact on protected matters. The action of removing mercury at each gold mine and its impacts on matters protected by the EPBC Act needs to be assessed on a case by case basis".

4. Since the international negotiating process began in 2009, expenditure by the department related to the negotiations has been:

***Travel to international negotiating meetings:***

- Two officers attended the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Governing Council meeting. February 2009, Nairobi, Kenya – Total: \$26,170.
- Two officers attended the first meeting of the International Negotiating Committee (INC 1). June 2010, Stockholm, Sweden – Total: \$27,538.
- Two officers attended the second meeting of the International Negotiating Committee (INC 2). January 2011, Chiba, Japan – Total: \$18,818.
- One officer attended the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Governing Council meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, and then went on to attend a non-mercury related meeting in Washington DC, United States. February/March 2011 – Total: \$29,260.
- Two officers attended the third meeting of the International Negotiating Committee (INC 3). October/November 2011, Nairobi, Kenya – Total: \$21,990.

Total spent on travel: \$123,776.

It is not practical to cost staff time involved in the negotiations.

***Reports:***

- A 2009 study on 'Mercury Sources, Transportation and Fate in Australia' by Macquarie University. The study cost \$300,000.
- A 2007 study on 'Current Regulatory and Voluntary Measures Related to Mercury in Australia' by Macquarie University. The study cost \$47,872.

Total spent on studies: \$347,872.

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Budget Estimates, May 2012

**Program: Division or Agency:** 2.1: EQD **Question No:** 050

**Topic:** National Waste Policy  
Implementation Plan

**Proof Hansard Page and Date** Written

**or Written Question:**

**Senator Heffernan asked:**

Could Department please provide details of a timetable and total departmental funding allocated to date for the following parts of Outcome Number 5 of the National Waste Policy Plan (Page 21, Table 6) and how much of each allocation has been spent to date:

1. Identifying hazardous substance locations across Australia for the persistent, bio-accumulative and highly toxic metal mercury;
2. Managing and minimizing the intergenerational legacy issues resulting from mercury at historical gold mining sites across the Australian landmass;
3. Developing best available evidence, techniques and technologies including details of international conferences on mercury that your staff have attended since 2010 to increase the departments knowledge base on mercury;
4. Identifying stockpiles of the toxic hazardous waste mercury in rural and remote areas;
5. Victoria has recently taken the globally unusual (dare I say totally reprehensible) step of reclassifying mercury in the environment as a non-hazardous mineral when it is in the ground, but classifies it as a hazardous waste when it is out of the ground. (Despite the fact this same government handed out 17.5 pound containers of mercury to prospectors in the early gold mining days. It should also be noted this mercury had previously been mined and processed overseas prior to it arriving in Victoria. Somehow, rather miraculously, this hazardous material transformed itself back into being a mineral after it had been lost into the environment during gold mining operations, where it is still largely percolating through the rivers and streams, today.)
6. Could you also please provide details of funds allocated to educate the National Waste Plan State Lead Agencies identified within Table 5 of this Plan, on the intergenerational risks of mercury in the environment and the planning schedule for this educational program.

**Answer:**

1. Major sources of mercury emissions in Australia have been identified in the study on 'Mercury Sources, Transportation and Fate in Australia' by Macquarie University (<http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Portals/9/Mercury/Documents/para29submissions/Australia-Hg%20inventory.pdf>). The study cost \$300,000. The National Pollutant Inventory (NPI; [www.npi.gov.au](http://www.npi.gov.au)) includes emission estimates for a range of mercury sources. In 2007, the National Environment Protection (NPI) Measure 1998 was varied to reduce the reporting threshold for mercury from 10 tonnes to five kilograms in order to increase the rate of capture of sources.
2. Management of historical gold mining sites is typically a responsibility for State and Territory governments. The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the department) commissioned a review in 2007 by Macquarie University entitled 'Current Regulatory and Voluntary Measures Related to Mercury in Australia' which cost \$47,872.
3. Presentations on technical aspects of mercury management have been provided at several of the international negotiating sessions attended by the department since 2010. Details of these techniques and technologies are available at: <http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Mercury/tabid/434/Default.aspx>
4. No national collation of mercury waste stockpiles has been done yet. Information on these sites would be sought from State and Territory governments where needed.
5. This is a matter for the Victorian Government.
6. Table 5 identifies lead agencies for the overall implementation of the National Waste Policy. Issues specifically relating to mercury will be considered more fully once the requirements of the proposed globally legally binding instrument on mercury are confirmed in 2013.

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Budget Estimates, May 2012

**Program: Division or Agency:** 2.1: EQD **Question No:** 051

**Topic:** Funding allocated to documenting mercury pollution

**Proof Hansard Page and Date** Written

**or Written Question:**

**Senator Heffernan asked:**

In light of the pending introduction of the Globally Binding Mercury Instrument by the UNEP the revised MDB draft does not mention the water quality issues relating to mercury and arsenic pollution for the Murray River Ramsar zones and the Murray Darling Basin in general.

45.64% of New South Wales and 40.38% of Victoria have been subject to historical gold mining activity it is disappointing that this globally critical toxic metal pollution issue has not even been mentioned in the revised MDB plan. This lack of recognition will have a significant impact on all of the Murray Darling Basin farming communities once the globally binding mercury instrument comes into force.

The revised draft does not mention sedimentation issues resulting from logging activities in great dividing range in both Victoria and NSW. The bulk of the mercury and often times arsenic pollution that flows into the Murray River RAMSAR Zones comes from historical gold mining areas in Victoria and in particular the Upper Goulburn river historical gold mining area and the Ovens Valley historical gold mining areas.

1. Could you provide details of funds allocated by the Department over the next 5 years to better document the extent of mercury pollution across the Australian continent?

**Answer:**

1. Major sources of mercury emissions in Australia have been identified in the study on 'Mercury Sources, Transportation and Fate in Australia' by Macquarie University (<http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Portals/9/Mercury/Documents/para29submissions/Australia-Hg%20inventory.pdf>). The study cost \$300,000. The National Pollutant Inventory (NPI; [www.npi.gov.au](http://www.npi.gov.au)) includes emission estimates for a range of mercury sources. In 2007, the National Environment Protection (NPI) Measure 1998 was varied to reduce the reporting threshold for mercury from 10 tonnes to five kilograms in order to increase the rate of capture of sources.

No additional funds have yet been allocated by the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities over the next five years for documenting mercury pollution. Issues relating to mercury will be considered more fully once the requirements of the proposed globally legally binding instrument on mercury are confirmed in 2013.

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**Program: Division or Agency:** 2.1: EQD **Question No:** 052

**Topic:** Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative - Funding

**Proof Hansard Page and Date** Written

**or Written Question:**

**Senator Boyce asked:**

1. I refer to a submission by Dr Jennifer Pearson of the Australian Association for Environmental Education stating that since 2010, annual funding for AuSSI has been “drastically” cut. Can you detail the detail, size, timing and rationale for those cuts?
2. The Prime Minister, Minister for School Education and the Environment Minister have all affirmed their support for AuSSI. Does the Department think the program in question has value and is working?
3. From your knowledge will the AuSSI program will be continued next year? And if not, why not?
4. Where will the funding afforded AuSSI be redirected to?
5. According the statements by DEEWR and the DSEWPaC, AuSSI complements and links already existing environmental and sustainability projects in Australian schools. Can you provide specific programs that AuSSI has complimented and linked?
6. What substitute sustainable education programs will replace AuSSI in the 3200 Australian schools that have employed the program and what programs of similar objective will be made available in schools on a wider basis?

**Answer:**

1. The Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI) is a partnership between the Australian Government and State and Territory governments for integrating education for sustainability into Australia’s schooling system, in support of a sustainable future. Within schools, the AuSSI is delivered through State and Territory governments. As such, jurisdictions implement the AuSSI under various different models and its delivery and resourcing is the responsibility of each jurisdiction. For its part the Australian Government has provided \$2.9 million in grants to State and Territory governments to support the implementation of AuSSI, however, there is no specific annual funding for the AuSSI.

2. The AuSSI is a framework which has operated since 2002, when the initial pilots were run, for integrating education for sustainability into Australia's schooling system, in support of a sustainable future. It engages students, staff and members of the community in improving the management of a school's resources and facilities and integrates these activities across the curriculum. A 2010 operational review of the AuSSI found that overall, substantial progress has been made towards the achievement of the AuSSI goals. More recently, environmental sustainability has been included as one of three cross-cutting priorities integrated across all learning areas in the new Australian Curriculum.
3. Within schools, the AuSSI is delivered through State and Territory governments. As outlined in response to Question 1, jurisdictions employ various implementation models and its delivery is the responsibility of each jurisdiction.
4. See response to Question one.
5. AuSSI links to and complements programs such as Energy Smart Schools, WasteWise, Waterwatch, Landcare and the Reef Guardian Schools Programme.
6. See response to Questions one and two.