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Minister for the Environment

A Plan for a Cleaner Environment:

The Coalition Government's National Environment Policy

Paper to the Nursery and Garden Industry

National Conference

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SYDNEY

1. Introduction

Thank you, Jo. I welcome the opportunity to address the final day of this conference. I hope it's been a stimulating and productive event so far and you go home inspired and re-energised.

I don't need to tell people in the nursery and garden industry about the inextricable links between a healthy environment and a healthy economy. Our very way of life depends on clean air, clean land and clean water. Conversely, a vibrant, strong economy pays major dividends for the natural world around us.

Your members know better than most how much Australians care about their own personal environments and about how they invest emotionally and financially in their own backyards.

In the western world our homes and gardens are a major preoccupation and not just for those of us addicted to Grand Designs or The Block.

Householders, community organisations and businesses come to you for advice on how to sustain and improve the world around them.

Over the years you've made a major contribution to how people can protect their local environments. You've helped tackle weeds and encouraged customers to choose regionally appropriate plants and trees that offer habitat to native birds and animals.

You've helped people drought-proof their gardens and rebuild and replant after fires and floods.

Today I want to outline how the Australian Government is complementing that work on the national scale with its *Plan for a Cleaner Environment* – a plan that touches on every aspect of our lives in urban, regional and rural Australia.

2. A Plan for a Cleaner Environment

Our Plan rests on four pillars: clean air, clean land, clean water and heritage protection.

The four pillars will help realise the Government's vision of a great society by protecting and improving our environment for future generations.

This is a vision of communities and businesses getting on with the work of building a sustainable and resilient Australia without government and bureaucracy getting in the way.

Clean Air

Our Clean Air pillar is of particular relevance to the development of the urban environment and it centres on two important reforms: the repeal of the carbon tax and the implementation of our Direct Action plan.

The carbon tax is a multi-billion dollar impost on the Australian economy that doesn't even reduce Australia's emissions. Under the carbon tax, Australia's domestic emissions are projected to go up, not down.

Under the previous government's plans, we would only meet the bipartisan commitment to a five per cent emissions reduction by 2020 through businesses being forced to buy billions in international permits, in addition to the billions they would be paying in carbon tax liabilities.

The carbon tax is a \$7.6 billion dollar hit on the economy, yet a recent update of Australia's National Greenhouse Gas Inventory shows that for the first year of the carbon tax overall emissions fell by just 0.1 per cent.

Let me reiterate: a \$7.6 billion slug to Australian households and businesses for a 0.1 per cent reduction in emissions in the first 12 months.

What's driving this small decline in emissions is a fall in demand for electricity due to a decline in manufacturing, increased renewable generation under the Renewable Energy Target and reduced economy activity.

Rather than the punitive carbon tax, our Government will reach its emissions reduction target through our Direct Action plan to efficiently and effectively source low-cost emissions reductions and improve Australia's environment.

A key element of Direct Action is the Emissions Reduction Fund. With initial allocations of \$300 million, \$500 million and \$750 million over the next three years, the Fund will provide a pool of capital to create a market for abatement. This will be far more effective at reducing Australia's emissions than the carbon tax because it directly targets emissions-reducing activities.

This Fund will provide a powerful and direct incentive for key sectors across the Australian economy to reduce their emissions by utilising a reverse auction mechanism, in which the Fund will 'buy back' low cost abatement.

This low cost abatement may involve projects to clean up waste coal mine gas, clean up power stations or to capture landfill gas from the millions of tonnes of waste deposited in our cities'

landfills each year. Or it may be a mix of energy efficiency improvements in Australian homes, commercial buildings and industrial facilities.

The built environment – in particular the commercial building sector which accounts for more than nine per cent of Australia’s total emissions – offers significant low cost abatement opportunities. Indeed, the property industry has a demonstrated capacity to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Property Council of Australia estimates that emissions from the built environment grew by only eight per cent between 2003 and 2011, despite higher growth in commercial and residential floor space of 17 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. The Emissions Reduction Fund will provide the right incentives to build on this track record.

The Emissions Reduction Fund will encourage the property development sector to undertake a range of energy efficiency projects, such as improving the building shell, upgrading major equipment (such as HVAC systems or chillers) or installing co-generation systems. There remains great potential for the sector to contribute further greenhouse gas reductions and the Fund will help to unlock that potential.

Direct Action also encompasses initiatives that will mean continued progress for our urban areas and how sustainable they are into the future. For example, the Government believes that renewable energy has an important role to play in reducing Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions. To that end we are currently considering how best to support the uptake of solar technologies by towns and communities. Options will include a focus on low-income households and regional communities.

I would like to finish this section by mentioning another of our Clean Air initiatives: our objective of completing a National Clean Air Agreement by 1 July 2016. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimated that urban air pollution was responsible for more than 3000 early deaths in 2003. Particle (as particulate matter) and ozone pollution levels are of particular concern, with peak particulate matter levels frequently exceeding the current national air quality standard in most of Australia’s metropolitan areas.

A National Clean Air Agreement will reduce air pollution and manage emerging air quality issues through cooperative action at the national, state and local level. Governments and key stakeholders including industry will work strategically together towards common goals under the Agreement.

Clean Land

As well as the legislative and planning reforms centred on the One Stop Shop, the Clean Land component of our Plan for a Cleaner Environment includes new National Landcare, Green Army and 20 Million Trees programs.

The creation of a One Stop Shop for environmental approvals is aimed at clarifying, streamlining and simplifying the approvals process. It will remove cumbersome duplication while maintaining high environmental standards. Federal environmental standards are enshrined in law and will remain in place but projects will no longer have to undergo a rigorous state assessment process, and then have to start all over again and go through the same process at Federal level. It's about cutting red and green tape, without compromising environmental standards and protections.

The National Landcare program will involve merging existing schemes to create a single program that is simple, local and long term. This approach ensures targeted local action to improve environmental outcomes, helping the Government achieve its national objectives.

Under the new model, local communities, Natural Resource Management and Landcare groups will be given far greater involvement in identifying and addressing local priorities in their catchment areas.

By changing the centralised approach of the previous Labor Government, we are giving local communities the opportunity to use their local knowledge to identify the key areas of need in their regions.

The Green Army program aims to achieve two objectives. Firstly, it will provide up to 15,000 young Australians with training in conservation management that will equip them well for the future, whether in professional or voluntary capacities. Secondly, and just as importantly, it aims to deliver long term, tangible outcomes for local environments and heritage places.

This voluntary initiative will recruit young people aged 17–24 years who are interested in protecting their local environment while gaining hands-on, practical skills and experience.

Green Army teams will be paid a training wage and will work for up to six months on a range of projects such as cleaning up riverbanks and creek beds, revegetating degraded land, sand dunes, and mangrove habitat, and restoring and conserving heritage places and landscapes.

The public comment period for the program’s draft statement of requirements, which will be used to inform the final delivery requirements, closed earlier this month. The comments we received will be extremely valuable to inform effective program delivery.

We expect to tender for Service Providers to operate the Green Army shortly.

While Direct Action will primarily be delivered through the Emissions Reduction Fund, our 20 Million Trees Program will also make a contribution. It will support practical change at a local level, aiming - as the name suggests - to plant 20 million trees by 2020 to re-establish green corridors and urban forests, with a focus on better ecosystem health.

Not only will the plantings generate new abatement opportunities, they will also support Australia’s biodiversity. Twenty Million Trees projects will support threatened species and improve ecosystem services, such as plant pollination and water cycling. They will also

contribute to the liveability of our cities and towns by helping to moderate climate and creating 'greener' spaces.

There is no doubt that life is better for millions of Australians because of the parks, gardens and trees that are an integral part of our cities and towns. Every child instinctively knows that a natural park is cooler than a car park.

So as our cities inevitably expand, we owe it to our descendants to make the same provision for their recreation as our ancestors made for ours.

I note that the Nursery and Garden Industry of Australia recently told the Australian Senate:

“Trees that populate both Green Corridors and Urban Forests are vital in creating resilient sustainable cities that provide healthy and enjoyable places for people to live.”

At the next level, I would like to set the challenge for each of our cities to expand urban tree coverage by 10 per cent out till 2025. It is in the new suburbs that these trees are most necessary and most valuable.

Clean Water

The Clean Water pillar covers both fresh water and the sustainable use of our great ocean resources.

Our clean water plan supports a range of region-specific programs for healthy rivers, lakes and wetlands. In addition, a significant part of my portfolio focuses on the effective implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, to guarantee the long term health of both our largest river system and the nation's largest food bowl that relies on it.

Securing Clean Water and ensuring it gets to the right places is another clear priority for the Government and for the community at large.

Whether in cities or towns, as farmers, local community leaders, academics or state and federal policy makers, we have to work within the realities of our unpredictable natural environment, to get the best outcomes for both our rivers and the communities that rely upon them.

Drought is an Australian feature and once again many farmers are looking at bare paddocks and failed crops.

Water reform will not stop droughts and all of the inevitable associated problems. However, the application of sound market principles to our use of water does mean that both our farmers and our river systems are more robust and better able to face the tests of droughts.

As we approach the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the National Water Initiative later this year we should redouble our commitment to its important principles, to using the power of markets to get the best returns from our scarce water resources, and to recognising the value of our water resources in having a true value applied to them.

Meanwhile, we are committed to ensuring that the management of our marine resources is based on the best possible science. Our long-term plan to protect the Great Barrier Reef features a range of initiatives targeted at the real and pressing threats to the long-term health of the Reef.

Earlier this year, the Australian and Queensland governments released the 2014 State Party Report on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area which highlights the significant progress being made to improve the management, health and protection of this amazing iconic area. The report shows that the Great Barrier Reef's outstanding universal value and integrity remain largely intact.

Since coming into office our Government has begun implementing a number of initiatives to ensure the long-term protection and sustainability of the Great Barrier Reef.

We are working to support the Reef through our Reef 2050 Plan, establishment of the Reef Trust, and by funding important projects such as Crown of Thorns Starfish eradication and the Gladstone Healthy Harbours Partnership.

National Heritage

The fourth pillar—Heritage Protection—centres on the preparation of a new National Heritage Strategy that will take a fresh look at how we can best manage and preserve our outstanding natural, Indigenous and built heritage.

Our aim is to have a draft Heritage Strategy made available for public comment during Heritage Week celebrations in April. The draft Strategy will explore new and more efficient ways to protect our national heritage and will also look at alternative funding models and methods to strengthen community partnership and engagement.

We have also committed to a new Community Heritage and Icons Grants program, which will offer local history and heritage groups small grants to preserve, celebrate and promote the special places and traditions that underpin community identity.

3. Environmental Science

Before winding up, I'd say a few words about environmental science, in particular how it relates to the horticultural industry.

When I can steal a few minutes away from Parliament, one of the highlights of spending time in the Parliamentary Triangle is a stroll through the rose gardens of Old Parliament House and seeing if I can distinguish between a ‘Queen Elizabeth’ and an ‘Eiffel Tower’.

I’m not surprised that the fascination with roses as a garden fashion in Australia has spanned more than 90 years.

The external surrounds of new Parliament House with its abundance of native grasses and eucalypts are such a contrast. They tell the story of how much we have learned about our natural environment and how it has changed and shaped our identity.

We are constantly learning more about our environment, getting better at measuring it, and understanding the science behind how it provides the air, water and other services we humans need to survive.

Our Australian National Botanic Gardens supports a living collection of around 74,000 individual plants including 6,200 Australian natives.

The Gardens have a great relationship with your industry. The recent release of Correa ‘Canberra Bells’ to celebrate Canberra’s centenary is just one example.

The Botanic Gardens’ horticultural experts worked with the grower to test the cultivar in a select range of locations.

This helped understand how the plant will perform ‘in situ’ and provided important information on the cultivation requirements prior to the release of this new cultivar.

The Australian National Botanic Gardens is pioneering cultivation of species that are either little known or have not been successfully cultivated in the past. The outcomes from this testing can help your industry as it introduces and cultivates a new range of Australian flora.

I know many of you use and value the Gardens' comprehensive and publicly available documentation and its links to national databases.

While we often hear the bad news about biodiversity loss, we are also discovering species we didn't previously know about.

The Australian Government's Bush Blitz partnership with BHP Billiton and Earthwatch sends teams of scientists out to catalogue the plants and animals on reserves around the country.

In the last four years, scientists have discovered 11 new vascular plant species and up to 14 new non-vascular plant species such as lichens, mosses, fungi and liverworts across Australia. These are species that are completely new to science.

Meanwhile, across the continent and across scientific disciplines, the Australian Government's National Environmental Research Program invests \$20 million each year in research to support decision making.

The funding aims to support the application of our knowledge wisely and for greatest benefit for the environment, the economy and industry.

Conclusion

As the Prime Minister noted last week, "we will never build a strong economy by trashing our environment, but we will never help our environment by trashing the economy either".

As business people, members of the Nursery and Garden Industry Association would share our vision of an Australia that is open for business, innovative, dynamic and forward looking is clear.

We are confident that our policy settings will deliver the environmental outcomes we seek, while enabling the growth we need.

We look forward to working with your sector to make this vision a reality.