

ADDRESS TO CLEAN AIR FORUM 2010

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Total Environment Centre was an originator and has been an ongoing supporter of the Action for Air strategy. We have been campaigning for clean air since our inception in 1972 with the main victory for the community being the introduction of lead-free petrol which also heralded new emission control technology on all cars.

We thought Action for Air was also a great advance.

It has been our duty to review progress on clean air every three years in concert with this regular forum – one of the constants in the government's promises in the Action for Air rollout.

In 2001 we said, while recognising that you could not expect quick results for an endemic problem and with a 25 year strategy:

“Foundation policies have not been implemented. Two areas in particular stand out – continuing rapid growth in VKT and poor progress in implementing *Action for Air* commitments to improve public transport. Continuing rapid growth in car use is also undermining the benefits of cleaner vehicles and fuels.”

In 2004 we reported:

“TEC assessed progress in implementing *Action for Air* at 4/10 and concluded that a major overhaul of *Action for Air* was needed to improve progress in meeting commitments and reaching air quality goals.”

In 2007, we found:

“It is clear that a major effort is required to improve public transport by investing in new infrastructure. This should be coupled to strong demand management measures such as congestion charging and a major overhaul of parking policies...

Another concern is the degree of seriousness that air quality is given in development decisions. There are doubts that at the macro and regional planning levels, institutional arrangements have the capacity to treat air quality as an eminent matter, even though it is mentioned in planning strategies.”

Just a few months ago we claimed that air pollution in Sydney is a public health emergency in response to the DECCW report that even though vehicle emission standards have been tightened, any gains are being outrun by population growth, increased car use and the growing popularity of heavier cars.

It's not a short, sharp emergency – it will last for many years.

Should we just get used to it? Or comfort ourselves that it's not as bad as other cities?

Of course not.

So let's look at what has happened in the last three years and see if there is any cause for hope.

First the key measure of the main driver of pollution – total vehicle kilometers traveled. Action for Air states the target is to stop total VKT growth by 2021. Growth does appear to be slowing but it's very unlikely to stop by 2021. However, per capita VKT growth may be ceasing in line with the target 2011 target as between 2001 and 2009 per capita VKT fell by 0.4%.

The total VKT measure brings up the agenda of fuel type and emission controls – if we put aside the massive economic issue of traffic congestion. I'll make some brief comments about future fuels in a moment.

Second - public transport infrastructure.

The Epping to Chatswood rail line has been opened. The Parramatta to Epping extension has just been promised by the Gillard government – we'll have to see what happens after Saturday. Seven rail clearways and turnbacks have been completed and five are under construction. And it finally looks like an inner west light rail system will get underway. The bus system has seen some improvement too.

So there's been a bit of momentum gathering.

However, there have been significant delays on the north west and south west rail links with the result that urban development will continue to outstrip public transport.

Given the scale of the problem that puts us on the reverse track again.

In terms of stationary emissions the last three years saw debate on the application of vapour recovery at petrol stations. In July 2007 the government announced a proposal to extend vapour recovery units stage 2 to all large petrol stations by 2010 and further action in metropolitan Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast and Sydney up to 2016.

The timetable for existing petrol stations has slipped badly.

Thirdly in relation to urban land use and transport planning there does appear to be a growing admission that we must commit to implementing a coordinated strategy.

That sentence sounds over qualified but that is where we are at – a possible launching pad for real policy.

The most concrete actions so far are the development of denser settlement around transport nodes. This must continue.

Turning to fuel.

There have been some improvements in the emission standards for light and heavy (diesel) vehicles but it will take some time to transition the fleet. It will take even longer for the passenger vehicle fleet.

The fuel efficiency and therefore emissions intensity of the car fleet is one of the lowest in the OECD. And the turnover rate is slow – about ten years.

Which brings me to the ‘promise’ of electric and hybrid vehicles.

Australia has about 12 million cars. It would be great if they could all be turned over to cleaner fuels quickly – but this won’t happen.

It won’t be made mandatory to buy such vehicles and market forces with competing vehicle types, cost of petrol and vehicle prices will have to play out. Nor is there any evidence that the industry has the capacity to produce 12 or even 6 million hybrid or electric vehicles in the next ten years; or that we can get the recharging infrastructure and additional¹ clean energy sources in place in that timeframe.

¹ Any increase in demand for electricity arising from clean vehicles should be as a result of additional clean energy power generation; as the current 20% by 2020 target should in combination with energy efficiency measures eat into the demand share of fossil fuel power supply.

I'd love it to happen but we can't put all or even most of our eggs in the one basket.

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In summary I think the best I can say is that prospects for action are marginally better than at the last reporting date – but the big warning signs are flashing. We could easily fall even further behind in the air pollution battle.

The next four years will be crucial.