

Labor and the WA Environment 2001-2008

This paper reviews the achievements and failures of the State Labor Government of Western Australia in addressing environmental issues over their period in office from 2001-2008

The ALP came into Government in 2001 with an extensive environmental platform which was a major part of their campaign to win office from the incumbent Coalition Government. A central part of the ALP's policy was several iconic promises that served to distinguish it from the Coalition on environmental issues. These promises included:

1. The development of a State Sustainability Strategy and its implementation
2. A halt to the logging of old-growth forests and the creation of 30 new national parks in the south west forests.
3. A strategy to tackle the State's water crisis.
4. A ban on uranium mining and nuclear waste dumps in WA.

These promises were underpinned by many other detailed commitments in areas such as biodiversity, salinity, climate change, renewable energy, wetlands, air quality, marine issues, waste management and environmental protection.

In its first term of Government, under the leadership of Geoff Gallop, the Labor Government made significant progress on each of these issues. However it performed poorly on implementing its detailed list of commitments.

For the 2005 State Election the Labor Government repeated its commitment to these issues and promised to take them further. It also added several new major issues, including:

1. Biodiversity legislation and Strategy
2. Establishing an Office of Climate Change and setting a mandatory renewable energy target of 6% on the SWIS by 2010.
3. New sustainability legislation
4. Controls on coastal development.

In addition the Labor Government issued a detailed Environmental Policy with many commitments in key areas. This report will examine their successes and failures in delivering these commitments.

Highlights of the Gallop/Carpenter Government's Environmental Performance

- Protected identified old growth forest, created 30 new national parks.
- Implemented the contaminated sites legislation
- Passed the Waste Management legislation (but not the regulations)
- Established the Office of Climate Change
- Completed the Southern Suburbs Railway
- Initiated the Water Forever Project
- Maintained the ban on GMO crops
- Maintained the ban on uranium mining and nuclear waste dumps (but failed to legislate on these issues).
- Published the 3rd State of the Environment Report for WA (but failed to provide an implementation plan).
- Initiated a Strategic Review of the Banded Ironstone Formation Ranges in the Yilgarn (but so far has not progressed proposed A-Class reserves to protect them from mining).
- Established the Northern Development Taskforce to control LNG development in the Kimberley into a single hub (ongoing)
- Responded to public pressure not to over-exploit the Yarangadee Aquifer for Perth's water supply.
- Rejected marina proposals for Maud's Landing (but failed to nominate the Ninagaloo reef for World Heritage listing).

Failures of the Gallop/Carpenter Government on Environmental Policy

- Abandoned the Swan Coastal Plain Wetlands Environmental Protection Policy
- Failed to complete the Biodiversity Strategy and enact the promised Biodiversity Legislation
- Abandoned the State Sustainability Strategy, failed to enact the legislation, disbanded the sustainability round table.
- Neglected air quality issues and failed to implement or update Perth's Air Quality Management Plan
- Failed to make progress in addressing greenhouse issues. Failed to make progress in reducing WA's accelerating greenhouse gas emissions. Failed to achieve progress in renewable energy implementation. Failed to act on phasing out coal fired power, instead proposing additional coal capacity in Bunbury and the Midwest (Eneabba).
- Failed to honour its commitment to power the Kwinana Desalination Plant with renewable energy.
- Failed to significantly progress the no-take marine parks agenda since Ningaloo, or to reverse declining fisheries in the Southwest
- Combined the Department of Environmental Protection with the Department of Conservation and Land Management, thereby creating a dysfunctional agency with inherent conflicts of interest (especially on issues such as prescribed burning and air quality). Many able staff have resigned as a result and the DEC is unable to carry out many key functions effectively (such as park management and policy development)
- Disbanded the community consultative committee on toxic wastes before it had completed its work to find toxic waste disposal sites.
- Failed to act on any of the recommendations of the EPA's 3rd State of the Environment report.
- Has failed to ensure that funding for the environment, currently running at just 1.3% of the total State Budget, keeps up with the enormous pressures on our environment from the resources boom and climate change.

Detailed Assessments

1. Sustainability

Score 1/10

The Carpenter Government has abandoned the ALP's commitment to sustainability and has dismantled the sustainability unit in the Premier's Department and abolished the Sustainability Round Table. It has failed to keep its election promises to enact sustainability legislation, introduce sustainability reporting and sustainability assessment and indicators. Removed funding for the WA Collaboration sustainability project.

2. Forest Conservation

Score 5/10

Although the Gallop Government honoured its promise to halt the logging of old growth forests and created 30 new national parks in the south west forests, the Carpenter Government has done very little for forests – which continue to be unsustainably logged and mined - and has not implemented the tuart conservation strategy or the wandoo recovery plan as promised in 2001. While the Government continued to implement its ban on old-growth logging, it is clear that the rules governing the definition of just what comprises old growth are biased towards the Forest Products Commission. For example, several areas of old growth forest, and many individual old growth trees in previously logged areas, were allowed to be logged under the provision that any area that has been previously logged (even selectively) is not old growth.

3. Nuclear Issues

Score 9/10

The Carpenter Government has kept its commitments to prohibit uranium mining in WA, to prohibit the importation of radioactive waste into WA and to oppose the establishment of

nuclear waste dumps in WA. The Government has maintained this stance in the face of considerable pressure from the mining industry and from within the ALP. However, it has failed to legislate to prohibit uranium mining in WA and this would allow a future conservative Government to issue mining licences to uranium tenement holders without Parliamentary scrutiny.

4. Marine Conservation

Score 5/10

The Government has cut the funding to the Cockburn Sound Management Council and made it largely ineffective in protecting this important marine habitat. It has failed to nominate the Ningaloo Reef for World Heritage listing as promised before the 2001 election.

It has also failed to produce any significant sanctuary zones since Ningaloo. New Marine Parks at Jurien Bay and Dampier Archipelago had minimalist scientifically proposed sanctuaries severely eroded as a knee-jerk reaction to pressure from the heavily Government funded Recreational Fishing lobby. Regional marine planning in the southwest has failed to deliver any significant marine conservation outcomes.

5. Water Resource Management

Score 7/10

The Government has implemented its State Water Strategy and made significant savings in water use through a combination of measures. It has initiated a long term planning project called Water Forever which acknowledges that future water sources will have to be derived from climate independent sources. However it has failed to honour its commitment to power the Kwinana Seawater Desalination Plant with renewable energy.

On the positive side the Government has signed the National Water Initiative, established the Department of Water and finalised the State Water Plan. Regional Water Planning commenced for South West, Perth, Peel and Pilbara regions. The Minister for the Environment refused the South West Yarragadee groundwater extraction proposal. It has commenced EIA for a second desalination plant at Binningup with commitments for renewables and emerging technologies. Significant progress has been made on water reform legislation, but there has been very little progress on the State Water Recycling Strategy. Managed Aquifer Recharge trials have commenced at Beenyup using reverse osmosis treated wastewater for aquifer replenishment. However the Government has allowed the overexploitation of the Gngangara Mound to continue, with action constantly being deferred to the Gngangara Sustainability Strategy.

It has permitted Catchment Thinning proposals to commence in the Wungong catchment even though these are unlikely to deliver an improvement in reservoir inflows, whilst obliterating biodiversity in the catchments.

6. Salinity, Rivers, Catchments and Wetlands

Score 2/10

The Government has established the Swan River Park but it has done very little to improve catchment management or fight dryland salinity. It has abandoned the Swan Coastal Plain Wetlands Environmental Protection Policy, which was a key promise at the 2001 and 2005 elections. It has also failed to implement its 2001 election promise to nominate more WA wetlands to the Ramsar list, it has failed to update the State Wetlands Policy and it has failed to develop a strategy for managing acid sulphate soils. Furthermore it failed to implement the promised Wild Rivers legislation and it cut the funding for the Swan River Trust.

7. Air Quality

Score 3/10

A review of the Perth Air Quality Management Plan has been completed but it has not been implemented. The Air Quality Coordinating Committee failed to meet during 2007 and has met only once in 2008. The Air Quality Branch has lost many key staff and is failing to implement the AQMP. The haze campaign is well behind its targets and nothing has been

done to address key issues such as smoky vehicles, indoor air pollution and air toxics. Air quality in major regional centres such as Collie, Bunbury and Busselton continues to deteriorate. The Perth fuel cell bus trials were terminated in 2007 and no replacement program has been introduced.

8. Waste Management

Score 3/10

The Government has passed waste management legislation but has not introduced any regulations in order to implement the Act. It has not introduced container deposit legislation or extended producer responsibility as promised in 2005. The new standards for compost derived from municipal waste have not been produced. The 3C process to identify toxic waste disposal sites was terminated by Minister McGowan in 2006 and the committee's recommendations were rejected by the Government.

9. Contaminated Sites

Score 7/10

The contaminated sites Act has been proclaimed and the regulations gazetted. The Act is now being implemented but the public database is still not available. The long-promised acid sulphate soils strategy has not progressed.

10. Greenhouse Issues

Score: 4/10

The Office of Climate Change has been established but it has a low profile and it appears that WA will increase its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% over 1990 levels by 2010. Some funding has been provided for Solar Schools and rooftop solar systems using Commonwealth programs. Nothing has been done to tackle major sources and three new coal-fired power stations have been approved. The Government has shown very little interest in renewable energy and has failed to get uptake of renewables at a meaningful scale. Its greenhouse abatement strategy has failed to address WA's accelerating emissions growth. It has failed to implement BASIX or a similar leading household energy efficiency code in WA's biggest ever residential building boom. It has expanded the public transport network with the new Perth to Mandurah railway but very little else has been done to reduce transport emissions. It has failed to provide tight controls on large GHG-emitting major resource projects.

11. Biodiversity

Score 2/10

The Biodiversity Legislation which was a key election promise, has not been introduced and the Biodiversity Strategy has not been completed. Some funds have been provided to groups fighting the cane toads in the Kimberley.

12. Environmental Protection

Score 5/10

The 3rd WA State of the Environment report was completed in 2007, but there is no implementation plan to address the numerous recommendations it contains. The EPA has set up a number of committees to review the operations of the Environmental Protection Act. The Government has not been successful in better management of clearing controls, and there have been many occasions where substantial land clearing has occurred despite public protest. It has also failed to provide a policy framework or adequate research funds to address the issues associated with Short Range Endemics and Subterranean Fauna with ongoing extinction risks from a number of resource projects. Funding for environmental protection has been frozen and DEC and the EPA are unable to effectively protect the environment during the current resources and housing booms.

13. Genetically Modified Crops

Score: 9/10

The Gallop Government introduced a moratorium on commercial genetically engineered crops through the *Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Act 2003* and the *Genetically Modified Free Areas Order 2004*. The Government has maintained this moratorium and not granted commercial cultivation licences, however it has granted a trial of GM canola near Esperance.

Environmental Report Card

Issue	Score	Grade
Sustainability	1/10	FAIL
Forests	1/2	MARGINAL PASS
Nuclear	9/10	DISTINCTION
Marine	1/2	MARGINAL PASS
Water	7/10	CREDIT
Rivers and Wetlands	1/5	FAIL
Air Quality	3/10	FAIL
Waste Management	3/10	FAIL
Contaminated Sites	7/10	CREDIT
Greenhouse Gases	2/5	FAIL
Biodiversity	1/5	FAIL
Environmental protection	1/2	MARGINAL PASS
GMO crops	9/10	DISTINCTION
Funding for the environment	1/10	FAIL
Overall Assessment	9/20	MARGINAL FAIL

Comment

Despite the fact that promises on the environment have been one of the distinguishing features between the Parties in the last two State elections, and despite considerable evidence of the increasing importance given to environmental issues by the electorate in WA as elsewhere, the Government's performance on the environment can best be described as patchy and lacklustre. It has performed with distinction on nuclear issues and GMO crops and its performance on contaminated sites and water resources is creditable. However it has failed on sustainability, wetlands, air quality, waste management, biodiversity, greenhouse issues and funding for the environment.

Overall our assessment is that the Government has under-achieved in this area after promising so much at the 2001 and 2005 elections. Of particular concern is the Government's poor performance on environmental issues since Alan Carpenter took over from Geoff Gallop in 2006. In that time there have been three Ministers for the Environment, none of whom has made any substantial contributions to conservation or environmental protection.

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