



## STEP Inc

Community-based Environmental Conservation since 1978

Sustainable Population Strategy  
Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities  
PO Box 787 Canberra, ACT, 2601

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Dear Taskforce

### **Submission to the Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia Panel From STEP Inc**

STEP is the largest environmental community group on Sydney's North Shore, with over 400 members. Our aim is to preserve natural bushland and to protect biodiversity for the enjoyment of future generations. Basic to our approach is the need to put the required planning to achieve these aims into a long-term time frame.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit the views of STEP Inc to the panel on an issue that is of deep concern for our members. We would like our leaders at all levels to openly discuss the issue of population. We want our leaders to appreciate that there cannot be infinite growth in a finite world and we would like them to plan to do something about it.

### **Definition of Sustainable Population**

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to adopt a national strategy for ecologically sustainable development (ESD) as far back at 1992. ESD is defined as '*using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained, and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased*'.

The government Environment website provides further explanations of the meaning of ESD as follows:

*"Governments recognise that there is no identifiable point where we can say we have achieved ESD. Some key changes to the way we think, act and make decisions, however, will help ensure Australia's economic development is ecologically sustainable. There are two main features which distinguish an ecologically sustainable approach to development:*

- *we need to consider, in an integrated way, the wider economic, social and environmental implications of our decisions and actions for Australia, the international community and the biosphere; and*
- *We need to take a long-term rather than short-term view when taking those decisions and actions.”*

(<http://environment.gov.au/about/esd/publications/strategy/intro.html#WIESD>)

In the view of STEP Inc it is essential that the principles of ESD are incorporated in the Sustainable Population Strategy. In fact the strategy should be titled the **Ecologically Sustainable Population Strategy**.

STEP Inc's detailed comments on the Issues Paper are attached.

Yours sincerely

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## Comments on the Issues Paper

The issues paper states that:

*“The strategy will consider the policies and programs required to ensure that we can shape and respond to changes in our population to build a sustainable Australia. The ultimate goal of the strategy is to improve the wellbeing of current and future generations through more effective recognition and management of the impacts of population changes, including the size, composition and location.”*

There are two fundamental aspects of the strategy:

1. The level of our population
2. The definition (and measurement) of wellbeing of current and future generations.

The strategy issues paper implies that Australia can only respond to changes in our population. STEP believes that the fundamental requirement of the strategy is that Australia **will determine** the level of our population. Ultimately the level of population must be stabilised. As the ecosystem resources available to the population are finite, management of the level of our population is a prerequisite for improvement in our wellbeing and, indeed, for the maintenance of our current levels of wellbeing.

Step Inc’s comments on the following questions listed in the Issues Paper are set out below.

### **Q1: What issues do you think an Ecologically Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia should address?**

The strategy should address:

- the stabilised level of population that should be achieved in the longer term;
- the policy measures required to ensure stabilisation will occur; and
- a timetable for the early implementation of these policies.

### **Q2: What do you think are the key indicators of an environmentally sustainable community?**

### **Q10: How should we measure the sustainability of our local, regional and national economies?**

### **Q14: What are some useful indicators to help measure the liveability and sustainability of our communities?**

These three questions all relate to measures of ecological sustainability and are commented on together.

## How Should the Stabilised Level of Population be Determined?

Currently the number of births exceeds the number of deaths each year so Australia is on the path of continuing increases in population before any consideration is made of the level of net migration. The current government policy of historically high levels of net immigration of over 200,000 per annum will, if maintained, lead to a population of more than 50 million by 2100.

Under very conservative assumptions with a total fertility rate of 1.6 and net migration of 140,000 pa. the population will still increase and will ultimately stabilize at 32 or 33 million from 2065 onwards (Source ABS, Population Projections, series 3222.0). With these assumptions that involve major changes from current fertility experience and migration policy, the population will still increase by about 50%.

And yet Australia does not have means to assess the effects such significant increases will have on our natural environment and the flow on effects in the longer term on human wellbeing. Already Australia is faced with significant social and environmental problems such as traffic congestion, pressures to use ecologically important and agricultural land for housing, water shortages and depleted fisheries. It is clear that we will have difficulty maintaining the current quality of life with more than double the current population as is likely to occur in the foreseeable future unless the population strategy is changed.

Therefore it is paramount that detailed assessments are made of the potential characteristics of Australia's natural and settled environment under possible future population scenarios. We cannot effectively manage our country if its population is allowed to increase outside the boundaries of expectations of standards of future wellbeing. If the increases in population in the near term future are too great it will not be possible to correct the deterioration in living standards that will become beyond our control. It is unacceptable for the current generation to create a situation that could have been foreseen, where life in Australia is deprived for future generations.

A number of studies have been made by leading ecologists (for example Tim Flannery and Paul Ehrlich) of the possible level of an ecologically sustainable population. These point to a limit of 10 to 12 million with current levels of usage of ecosystem resources. Clearly the recent history of net migration levels should not be allowed to continue and policies aimed at stabilising our population should be implemented as soon as possible.

STEP does not agree with the arguments that high migration levels are needed in order to maintain economic prosperity. Given the current population level and automatic increases that will occur through natural growth, the population should be limited to no more than 30 million.

## Measurements of Ecological Sustainability

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Feature Article, *Future directions for measuring Australia's progress*, September 2010 quotes from the report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, (Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi, 2009ix) "*What we measure shapes what we collectively strive to pursue and what we pursue determines what we measure*".

The Stiglitz et al report points out that assessments are needed: "*of current well-being and an assessment of sustainability, whether this can last over time. Current well-being has to do with both economic resources, such as income, and with non-economic aspects of peoples' life (what they do and what they can do, how they feel, and the natural environment they live in). Whether these levels of well-being can be sustained over time depends on whether stocks of capital that matter for our lives (natural, physical, human, social) are passed on to future generations.*"

The ABS Measures of Australia's Wellbeing, 2010 highlight continuing improvement of the population wellbeing but also demonstrate the significant deterioration in biodiversity and greenhouse gas emissions. They also highlight the fact that there is currently no series of measures available of major environmental conditions, viz land, inland waters, oceans and estuaries and waste. The measures also do not cover fundamental aspects of social wellbeing. STEP strongly supports the development and regular publication of indicators such as those suggested in the

Sustainable Development Panel Report. These indicators should be given as much prominence as the common economic indicators such as growth in GDP.

While the necessary comprehensive time series of data to measure current and expected future progress are not available, the following quotation from the 2006 State of the Environment Report demonstrates the data that is available of the deterioration that is occurring under existing population levels.

*"We can expect future pressures on the environment from population growth and from economic growth. These pressures will continue to increase unless there is some decoupling of growth from the non-sustainable consumption of resources, particularly energy, land, water and products dependent on limited natural resources (such as forestry and fisheries). This is a major adaptive challenge."*

We are very interested in the work being done by the ABS and international organizations in developing comprehensive measures of progress as described in the ABS feature article dated September 2010, "Future Directions for measuring Australia's Progress". We urge Australian governments to support the rapid development of this work.

### **Implementation of a New Population Strategy**

Implementation of a new population strategy based on the principles of ESD will require a new approach by governments to economic management. Currently, decision makers in Australia and many other countries place great importance on changes in GDP as an indicator of economic progress. However, economists have warned since its introduction that GDP is a specialised tool, and treating it as an indicator of general well-being is inaccurate and dangerous.

GDP is an estimate of market throughput, adding together the value of all final goods and services that are produced and traded for money. It has the advantages of relatively easy and timely calculation but many important economic activities are entirely excluded from GDP measurements, such as volunteer work, the costs of crime and an increasing prison population, and the depletion of natural resources. Indeed the recent floods will lead to an increase in GDP because of the expenditure on restoration of housing and infrastructure but this expenditure, in fact, is only achieving a return to the status quo prior to the floods.

STEP Inc therefore urges governments to adopt a multi-dimensional portrayal of the country's development policies that places less emphasis on short term economic management.

We endorse the recommendations of the report by the UK Sustainable Development Commission. The following quotation from the report produced by this body's Economics Commission describes the macro-economic model for the operation of the new development strategy that is required in Australia: *'one in which stability is no longer predicated on increasing consumption growth, but emerges through strategic investment in jobs, social infrastructures, sustainable technologies and the maintenance and protection of ecosystems.'* (Prosperity without growth? The transition to a sustainable economy, Professor Tim Jackson, March 2009). These recommendations are similar to the proposals outlined in the Sustainable Development Panel Report chaired by Bob Carr.

### **Conclusion – Summary of Views**

In conclusion STEP Inc considers that the Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia must:

1. Establish a policy in the near future to end the current trajectory of exponential increases in population.
2. Develop a series of indicators that support the definition of the ecologically sustainable development of Australia.
3. Set a maximum level of population and a period of transition to this level of population. In our view this maximum population should be less than 30 million.

We endorse the conclusions and proposals of the Sustainable Development Panel Report.