Public Health Association of Australia submission on the Review of the National Pollutant Inventory

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Preamble

The Public Health Association of Australia

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It is the pre-eminent voice for the public’s health in Australia.

The PHAA works to ensure that the public’s health is improved through sustained and determined efforts of the Board, the National Office, the State and Territory Branches, the Special Interest Groups and members.

The efforts of the PHAA are enhanced by our vision for a healthy Australia and by engaging with like-minded stakeholders in order to build coalitions of interest that influence public opinion, the media, political parties and governments.

Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions that underpin people’s health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease. These determinants underpin the strategic direction of the Association.

All members of the Association are committed to better health outcomes based on these principles.

Vision for a healthy population

A healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: living in an equitable society underpinned by a well-functioning ecosystem and a healthy environment, improving and promoting health for all.

The reduction of social and health inequities should be an overarching goal of national policy and recognised as a key measure of our progress as a society. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.

Mission for the Public Health Association of Australia

As the leading national peak body for public health representation and advocacy, to drive better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.
PHAA submission on the review of the National Pollutant Inventory

Introduction

The PHAA is pleased to make the following comments for consideration as part of the review into the operations and future for the National Pollutant Inventory. The National Pollutant Inventory was agreed to be Australia’s State, Territory and Commonwealth governments in 1998. It is Australia’s most comprehensive annual report on toxic pollution to air, water and land, providing a level of community right-to-know that is otherwise unavailable.

PHAA strongly supports the free availability of accurate and timely data on pollutant emissions to the environment, in an easy to interpret format.

The review is overdue because the NPI has not realised its potential, primarily because of continuing reductions in Commonwealth funding and resources which limited NPI operations to basic maintenance.

There is an essential need for the data the NPI provides and the useful analyses it could provide to enable State Governments to provide reliable environmental monitoring of industrial and other pollutants, and to achieve the ultimate objective of reducing pollutants which are hazardous for people and the environment.

It is not sufficient for the NPI to provide a database of pollutants for the information of the community, researchers and other interested parties. The Review needs to examine more effective consultation processes which enable NGOs and other community organisations with environmental concerns to meet regularly with the Commonwealth and the Intergovernmental Working Group to highlight community concerns for government action.

PHAA Response to the discussion paper

Appropriateness of environmental outcomes

Do the NPI NEPM outcomes remain relevant?

The desired environmental outcomes for the NPI NEPM are:

(a) The maintenance and improvement of:
    (i) Ambient air quality and
    (ii) Ambient marine, estuarine and fresh water quality

(b) The minimisation of environmental impacts associated with hazardous wastes and

(c) An improvement in the sustainable use of resources

The NPI seeks to achieve these outcomes through the national environmental protection goals:

- Collect a broad base of information on emissions and transfers of substances on the reporting list;
- Disseminate the information collected to all sectors of the community in a useful, accessible and understandable form

While there are clear and strong links between environmental impacts and health impacts, there will sometimes be differences in the way each is addressed. For this reason, the outcomes should explicitly refer to human health. PHAA suggests that the wording be altered to “The desired environmental and health outcomes...” and in (b) to “the minimisation of the environmental and health impacts...”

The NPI objectives also need to be better supported. They are not being currently achieved because the national environment protection goals which underpin the desired outcomes are not being achieved.
The information collected is not currently broad enough, with many pollutants not included on the reporting list. Further, the information collected is not currently being disseminated in a useful, accessible and understandable form.

If not, how might they be changed?
The NPI needs strong national air pollution standards to provide it with effective support. A more comprehensive, accessible pollution inventory with a national pollution control agency may be required to provide a more effective response to air pollution, and ensure meaningful consequences for breaches.

Enhancing environmental quality

Do you think the NPI or other PRTRs enhance environmental quality? If so, to what extent? Can you provide any examples?
The NPI and other PRTRs may not enhance environmental quality directly but they provide essential data for governments and the broader community on emissions and pollutants in support of enhancing environmental quality.

Emissions and pollutant levels in Australia need to be monitored for trends and for mechanisms to reduce these health hazards for people and the environment.

Accurate data on emissions and pollutants is only the first step. What the population deserves are mechanisms which lead to the reduction in these harmful chemicals and other materials by industry and other emitters, and the review needs to examine the best ways to achieve this with or without the NPI. The figure below presents an example of the process required in order for the NPI to enhance environmental quality.

As stated in the NPI Discussion Paper, page 17: the influence of the NPI on these activities is indirect, and regulatory measures are likely to have a larger impact.
Increasing public and industry understanding of substance emissions and transfers

Does the NPI sufficiently raise awareness of and encourage public, industry, government and academic users to engage with and use its data to improve environmental outcomes through greater understanding? If not, why not?

The NPI is a well-kept secret beyond the emitters, the NPI officials with the Commonwealth and other jurisdictions, and academic researchers. The NPI does a poor job of promoting broad awareness of its data because the significantly reduced Commonwealth funding leads to awareness programs being the first activities to suffer cuts.

The community needs to be informed with data about emissions and pollutants. However, the Commonwealth and State Governments need to establish more effective programs to reduce emissions without unrealistic expectations that this is going to be achieved by industry and community organisations without government intervention.

What data could be collected and published through the NPI to make it more useful for you or other users?

The PHAA is most interested in annual reporting which shows the levels of emissions and pollutants on a national basis and the trends so that the community is informed if the levels are decreasing. Environmental groups and other respondents could provide more specific data requirements for more reliable monitoring of emissions on a national basis, which should be reviewed with the primary aim of introducing regulation and/or complementary programs to reduce harmful emissions. In addition, only 93 toxic substances are reported. By comparison, the United States’ Toxics Release Inventory contains over 650 chemicals.²

Encouraging industry to use cleaner production techniques to reduce emissions and waste

How can NPI data be more useful to you, your organisation or your industry?

As an organisation which is concerned about the impact of harmful emissions and pollutants on people and the environment, the PHAA would want to see annual reporting on the levels of these emissions by jurisdiction, the trends and the main constituents.

Do you/would you use the data on the emission reduction techniques facilities implement? How?

PHAA is interested in what emission reduction techniques are being implemented, and their relative success. The NPI Discussion Paper, page 17, Figure 1, shows that only 20% of facilities reported on new emissions reduction techniques in the three years 2013-2016. This is disappointing and an indication that emissions reduction is not a broad industry priority.

Tracking environmental progress

Is the NPI a useful resource for tracking environmental progress?

The NPI data is not presented in a user-friendly manner and it is of limited value to the broader community for tracking any progress with environmental progress and emissions reduction in particular. Crucially, it is also currently of limited value to State and Territory Governments responsible for much of the regulation of environmental pollution. The NPI should be a useful and reliable tool for all Governments to identify where emissions and pollutions are exceeding acceptable levels and implement real sanctions. It should also serve as a place to identify and promote success stories and best practice in emissions and pollutant reductions.
How can the data it collects or the way the data is presented be more useful for tracking environmental progress?
The emissions data for individual companies appears to be only available as single year reports and is not readily compared with previous years. This data should also be provided by the companies and other emitters as a chart and table for previous years so that the trends and any reductions in emissions are readily discerned. This would be useful for further analysis. For example, it would be helpful to be able to use NPI data to undertake comparative life cycle impact assessments of different power stations and energy/fuel sources or intensive industrial regions. 

Environmental progress is also measured through improvements in measuring emissions and reducing them. The data collected by the NPI consists of estimations rather than measurements, and there is no requirement for information to be provided on how estimations were calculated.

Meeting community right-to-know obligations

Do you think the community expects to have emissions and transfer data for potentially harmful substances publicly available?
The PHAA believes that the community would expect that emissions and transfer data for potentially harmful substances to be publicly available. This is necessary because it is increasingly up to the community to demand action by governments to address environmental concerns.

How can the NPI better satisfy community expectations in this area?
As mentioned above, the NPI data is not presented in a user-friendly manner and it is of limited value to the broader community for tracking any progress with reducing environmental emissions in particular. The community needs to have available annual reporting by jurisdictions on the levels of key emissions and pollutants which also show the trends. This should be reported by emitters in a standard form to make the national data more convenient for compilation and presentation.

Any emissions above regulated levels and the associated health consequences should also be clear.

Assisting government in identifying priorities for environmental decision making

Does your Government agency use the NPI in program and policy development?
From interactions with various State and Territory EPA organisations it appears that there is varying use of the NPI data to support State and Territory programs for environmental monitoring of air quality and other emissions.

How can the NPI data be more useful in identifying priorities for environmental decision making?
The NPI data could be more effective if the Commonwealth had acted on the recommendations from previous reviews.

The Review needs to examine more effective consultation processes which enable NGOs and other community organisations with environmental and health concerns to meet regularly with the Commonwealth and the Intergovernmental Working Group to highlight community concerns for government action.
Environmental outcomes

On balance, to what extent do you think the NPI contributes, and what is its potential to contribute, to achievement of its desired environmental outcomes?

The review is overdue because the NPI has not realised its potential, primarily because of continuing reductions in Commonwealth funding and resources which limited NPI operations to basic maintenance. There is an essential need for the data the NPI provides and the useful analyses it could provide to enable State and Territory Governments to provide reliable environmental monitoring of industrial and other pollutants, and to achieve the ultimate objective of reducing pollutants which are hazardous for people and the environment.

It is not sufficient for the NPI to provide a database of pollutants for the information of the community, researchers and other interested parties. The Review needs to examine more effective consultation processes which enable NGOs and other community organisations with environmental concerns to meet regularly with the Commonwealth and the Intergovernmental Working Group to highlight community concerns for government action.

Substance list

Do you think a TAP should be formed to re-examine the substance list?

A TAP should be formed to re-examine the NPI substance list since the original list of 93 substances reported under the scheme is almost unchanged since its inception. The United States’ Toxics Release Inventory contains over 650 chemicals.\(^2\) Several sources of pollution are not required to be reported, including coal stockpiles, coal mines owned and operated by power stations and coal trains with uncovered wagons.

To what extent do you agree the NPI substance list should be further harmonised with international lists, for example through the OECD’s recommended harmonisation processes?

Further harmonisation of the NPI substance list with international lists should be considered, as long as it does not introduce bureaucratic delays to addressing the real priorities for monitoring and reducing the levels of pollutants in Australia.

Should the NPI substance list be able to be changed more easily than having to change the NPI NEPM legislative instrument?

Any administrative obstacles such as having to change the NPI NEPM legislative instrument to change the NPI substance list need to be removed.

User experience

What opportunities are there for the NPI to improve the user experience for the public, industry and government users?

There have been no improvements to the public database since the 2010 upgrade. Some feedback has been obtained from various stakeholders and there is an online reporting system for issues with the website. However, reported issues appear not to have been addressed.

The lack of time series data decreases the useability of the data and seems at odds with the core objectives of the NPI. Neither maintenance nor improvement can be easily identified and measured without time
series data. Evidence of improvement requires following the trend in all emissions from single facilities or regions, comparison between facilities, as well as following the trend in single pollutants.

It is important that the data extraction and reporting processes are user-friendly for both experts and the general public alike. Members of the public should be able to, for example, extract the emissions from a facility near their home and easily obtain data showing changes over time in a readily understandable format.

It is recommended that any further upgrades to the website/inventory should involve consultation with all stakeholders, including the public.

**Do you think public awareness of the NPI should be increased? If so, how? Would you support greater promotional activities including new measures to promote interesting uses of NPI data?**

Public awareness of the NPI should be increased, but it needs to be undertaken in line with making the NPI data more user-friendly. The current company annual reporting of figures should also be presented in standard tables and/or charts so that trends and any reductions are clearer. Some comparisons with international levels of comparative industry emissions would also be helpful. In addition, any emissions above regulated levels and the associated health consequences should also be made clear to the public.

**Is transfer data providing sufficient value to stakeholders? How can its usefulness be improved?**

The PHAA believes that the community would expect that emissions and transfer data for potentially harmful substances would be publically available. This is necessary because it is increasingly up to the community to demand action by governments to address environmental concerns.

**What additional supporting information if any would you like to see the NPI collect?**

The community needs to have available annual reporting by jurisdictions on the levels of key emissions and pollutants which also show the trends. This could be reported by emitters in a standard form to make the national data more convenient for compilation and presentation.

Interpretation of the data would be aided by the inclusion of any relevant information on plant operations. For example, if a facility was closed for maintenance this should be noted to avoid misinterpretation of a reduction in emissions.

**Reporters and thresholds**

**Could NPI data from industry sectors containing smaller facilities be collected through industry associations?**

The audience for the NPI is broad, and includes communities accessing information about their local facilities. Any aggregation of data which may decrease the availability of local information must be avoided for the NPI to fulfill its objectives.

An appropriate role for industry associations may be in assisting smaller facilities in their reporting requirements but not in conducting the data collection at a higher level.

**Do you support the current approach to allow reporting outside the financial year reporting periods? Are there any changes to reporting periods you would recommend?**

Comparison over time requires the extraction of data for identical time periods across multiple facilities or years. How this is achieved depends on how the data are collected, stored and extracted (for example unit record or aggregate level). Until all facilities are able to report at unit record level, the reporting periods must be set and consistent.
Accuracy of reporting/compliance and validation

How accurate and reliable do you expect NPI data to be? What processes should be improved or introduced to make NPI data more reliable?
The NPI data have been found to be inaccurate and not comparable with measurements. This is very concerning, since inaccurate data will be either not useful, or lead to potentially erroneous conclusions. There is also a lack of information available to easily assess the reliability of the data.
Users should be able to expect the data in the NPI to be accurate and reliable for making comparisons over time and between sources. This requires information being provided regarding how estimates are made, including any divergence between methods outlined in the EET manual and methods used.

Current funding model

Do you think more or less public funds should be spent on the NPI?
The diminishing Commonwealth funding for the NPI has left it in a precarious state. The NPI currently makes a minimal contribution to improving environmental quality or prioritising decision making. However, there is potential for the NPI to dramatically increase its usefulness and fulfil its objectives, with the restoration of funding.

What areas would more funds deliver more value for NPI users and stakeholders in your opinion?
The functionality of the NPI is the most critical area for improvement in the NPI. This will require some additional funding to make the necessary programming and structural changes to the database. Once the NPI is able to provide timely and accurate information to allow comparisons over time and across facilities, the State and Territory regulators may require additional funding to ensure compliance with regulations and the implementation of appropriate sanctions for breaches.

Sustainable resourcing models

Should NPI facility reporters and/or NPI data users be asked to contribute to improvements to the NPI through a cost recovery model?
It is appropriate for industry emitters of pollutants to be required to contribute to the costs for programs to monitor industry pollutants and to encourage approaches to reduce the levels of pollutants, in line with other government programs such as NICNAS (National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme). That industry may already contribute to other government programs to manage environmental pollutants should not be a factor in not seeking further industry funding for the operation, maintenance and development of the NPI data.
An industry charging schedule should be based on the size of the company, and the levels and toxicities of its emissions.

If a user pays system were introduced, would you still access the data? Why/why not?
Access to the NPI data should not be reduced by user charges for NGOs, other community organisations and academic researchers or the public.
Conclusion

PHAA supports the review of the National Pollutant Inventory. The NPI is an essential resource for governments, industry, civil society, researchers and communities for the provision of information about pollutants. The review is long overdue and there are critical issues to be addressed:

- The NPI must be adequately funded to allow the necessary upgrades and improvements to occur
- The functionality of the database must be improved to provide comparable data over time and across facilities
- The data and reporting must be easy to interpret to ensure that users are able to easily identify where pollutants have exceeded thresholds above which they are damaging to health and the environment

The PHAA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and the opportunity to contribute to a revitalised NPI.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

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References