



Australian Government

Department of the Environment and Energy

National Clean Air Agreement Priority Setting Process



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Introduction

The National Clean Air Agreement established an overarching framework to assist Australian governments to identify and prioritise specific air quality issues where concentrated effort is needed and that will optimise health, environmental and economic outcomes for Australians.

The framework includes a set of desired outcomes, key principles, and scope for a wide range of actions to be formulated over time across four strategic approaches (see Appendix 1). It underpins a priority setting process which will see recommendations put to Environment Ministers for decisions regarding air quality issues to be addressed under the Agreement.

A high level outline of the priority setting process included in the Agreement endorsed at the Meeting of Environment Ministers on 15 December 2015 is reflected in Figure 1. The Agreement's initial work plan identified the further establishment of the priority setting process in the first half of 2016, and its implementation ongoing from mid-2016. The Agreement and its initial work plan are available at: www.environment.gov.au/national-clean-air-agreement

The priority setting process set out in this document was developed by the Air Project Management Group. It is intended to guide considerations when recommending air quality priorities to be included on the Agreement's work plan, in line with the desired outcomes and principles of the Agreement.

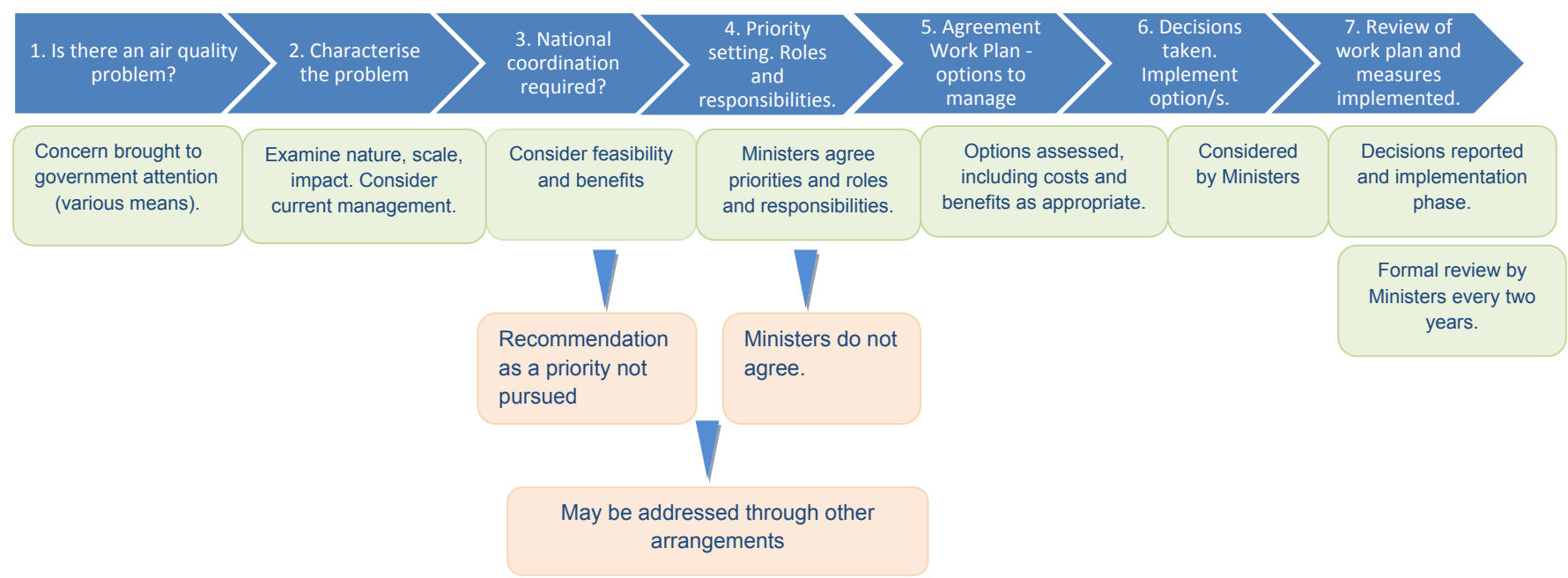
The structure of the following sections reflects that of the steps in Figure 1, with further information provided for each step. The identification of air quality issues as potential priorities under the Agreement is undertaken through Steps 1 up to Step 4 by the Air Project Management Group.

Recommendations for air quality issues to be addressed under the Agreement as a priority (and included on the Agreement's work plan) will be put to Environment Ministers through the Senior Officials Group, subject to majority agreement. The remaining steps 5 to 7 include decisions made by Environment Ministers, and the subsequent investigative work undertaken, actions to be implemented and review processes.

The roles of Environment Ministers, the Senior Officials Group and the Air Project Management Group in implementing the priority setting process have been outlined at each step of the process.

1 The Air Project Management Group was established in October 2015 to support the implementation of the Agreement by establishing and implementing the priority setting process. The Group comprises representatives from the Commonwealth government and each state and territory from within agencies responsible for air quality issues.

Figure 1. Overview of Priority Setting Process



Identifying priorities—Step 1 to Step 4

Step 1: Is there an air quality problem?

As a first step, an air quality problem needs to be identified, brought to the attention of government (state/territory and/or Commonwealth) and confirmed as an issue requiring a national response through the Agreement. Each jurisdiction will monitor such air quality problems and, if appropriate, table them at Air Project Management Group meetings for consideration, subject to completing Steps 2 and 3 of the process.

Air quality problems may be identified in several ways, including, but not limited to:

- community concern raised through ministerial and other forms of correspondence, including campaigns, at local, state/territory and Commonwealth government levels
- media reports
- adverse events
- monitoring and reporting under the National Environment Protection Measures (Ambient Air Quality; National Pollutant Inventory etc)
- State of the Environment reporting
- other forms of reporting, including inquiries, and health and international reports (e.g. World Health Organisation; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development).

Air quality issues may not be limited to pollutant/s, emission sources or health concerns, but may include broader issues such as information availability and accessibility, and knowledge, education and awareness.

The credibility of an identified air quality issue will need to be considered by jurisdictions to ensure resources are appropriately assigned to further characterise the problem and progress it through the priority setting process. Credibility criteria may include:

- published, peer-reviewed scientific/measured data from reputable organisation/s
- information that can otherwise be reasonably verified. Examples may include a clear description of the issue; recorded images; known events (e.g. fires); correlation with monitoring data and/or health reports; and consistency (over scale and time) in concerns raised.

If following this initial assessment one or more jurisdictions (state, territory and/or Commonwealth) considers that there is an air quality problem, further characterisation will be undertaken at Step 2.

Step 2: Characterise the problem

Several aspects (Table 1) will be taken into account when further characterising the air quality problem/s identified at Step 1. Note that this may determine that the problem does not (yet) require further action. Objective, rather than anecdotal, evidence is to be provided wherever possible.

Table 1: Characterising an identified air quality problem

| Characteristic | Consideration |
|--------------------|--|
| Nature | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transient • Seasonal • Ongoing • High risk of continuing (short to long-term progression) or re-occurrence • Pollutant(s) of concern (see Impact) • Already existing or emerging (how urgent/appropriate is it to take action now?) |
| Scale | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local • Regional • State/territory • Experienced by several jurisdictions • National |
| Source | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man-made or natural • Cross-border (e.g. downstream impacts of polluting activities or events) • International (e.g. oceans, atmosphere pollution) |
| Impact | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adverse health effects - how many people does/could it affect and in what way/s? (acute/chronic; minor/major) • Impacts sensitive populations (e.g. elderly, children, those with pre-existing respiratory and cardiovascular disease) • Adverse lifestyle effects (e.g. impedes outdoor activities) • Other adverse effects – environmental impacts, amenities, visibility, greenhouse gases, odour, dust etc. |
| Severity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current concentrations in exposed populations • Steady (usual) (note: does not necessarily mean ‘good’) • Worsening e.g. nature / scale / impact |
| Other risks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political/reputational considerations • Economic impacts • Social/stakeholder concerns • Technical limitations • Legal considerations • Environmental issues |
| Current management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a currently known method of effective management? If not, why? • If so: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Not currently managed (why?) – Management established or being established – Indirectly managed via arrangements in place to manage other related or unrelated issues – Effective for current situation and expected future situation – Effective for current situation but not for expected future situation – Ineffective (why?) |

Step 3: National coordination

Once an air quality problem has been characterised, an appropriate approach to address the issue may need to be considered, taking into account the elements in Step 2 as well as the underpinning framework of the Agreement (outcomes, principles, scope).

Under the Agreement, specific air quality issues where concentrated effort is needed and that will optimise health, environmental and economic outcomes for Australians are expected to be identified and prioritised. This lends itself to contemplating actions that may require a national approach, while not duplicating existing national air quality management arrangements or those specific to a jurisdiction.

The requirement for a national approach will be considered according, but not limited, to the following:

- Does it impact several jurisdictions or occur nationwide?
- Is a national approach likely to be an effective means or the only effective means of addressing the issue? Why?
- Is a national approach likely to have demonstrable benefits in addressing the problem (and at least cost) and minimising any risks (e.g. as in Table 1)?
- What resources (including people and funding) and timeframes will likely be required?
- Is a single environmental standard or other cross-jurisdictional measure required, for example, to achieve a consistent outcome or approach? Why?
- Is a national approach likely to impose unnecessary costs or obligations on jurisdictions for which the air quality issue is not a problem?
- Is there an existing implementation mechanism?
- What are the likely costs and benefits to government, industry and the community from national consistency?
- Would there be more collective benefit in addressing one or more other air quality issues and would this be at a lower overall cost to implement?
- Would it facilitate knowledge/information/technical transfer requirements? How?

The degree of analysis will likely depend on existing information, given decisions will need to be made by Environment Ministers and the Senior Officials Group before allocating resources to further in-depth analysis (e.g. options to implement a national approach and full cost-benefit analysis). It is not envisaged that this initial analysis would be on the scale of a full cost-benefit analysis, but rather a short paper setting out rationale against the criteria in Steps 2 and 3.

If the initial analysis indicates that there is an air quality problem and that a national approach is appropriate and will have added benefits, the air quality problem will move to Step 4 in the priority setting process.

Step 4: Priority setting and roles and responsibilities

The evidence, analysis and rationale for a national approach to address an air quality problem will be gathered by jurisdictions through Steps 1 to 3. One or more jurisdictions may bring this collated information to the Air Project Management Group for further consideration.

Step 4 has two parts—identifying roles and responsibilities, and seeking a decision for agreed priorities by Environment Ministers.

Roles and responsibilities

Identifying who will lead/undertake the investigative work to recommend appropriate action/s includes consideration of existing powers and responsibilities, as well as available resources that can be contributed to the priority. A national approach does not necessarily mean that the Commonwealth will take the lead on determining an appropriate action; for example, a national approach may be best developed by a few jurisdictions who share a common issue, but the approach developed can be more readily adopted by other jurisdictions if a need becomes evident.

A jurisdiction/s that brings an air quality issue to the Air Project Management Group for consideration should be prepared to sponsor or co-sponsor the work towards progressing a recommendation to Environment Ministers through the Senior Officials Group. Jurisdictions may wish to coordinate their efforts at this stage.

Seeking a decision from Environment Ministers

The process to seek a decision by Environment Ministers whether to include a recommended priority(ies) on the Agreement's work plan, is outlined below:

- Jurisdiction sponsor/co-sponsors and prepares a paper outlining:
 - recommended priority(ies) and supporting rationale (gathered at Steps 1 – 3) to help ensure the decision makers that due consideration has been given to the issue
 - recommended roles and responsibilities; lead/s
 - expected/available resource requirements
 - recommended approach to address the problem – may include limited investigative work to determine options
 - risk analysis – including risks of taking no action
 - likely timeframes to determine recommended action and its implementation – if known
 - an assessment of the practicality of being able to achieve a solution, to help ensure decisions are taken on realistic approaches and outcomes.
- The Air Project Management Group meets to consider the paper/s. Given the significant work loads on the Agreement's initial work plan, it is envisaged that only one or two priorities will be recommended to the Senior Officials Group. The Air Project Management Group will agree on which priorities will be recommended.
- Based on majority support, the Air Project Management Group submits the paper to the Senior Officials Group. Wherever possible, the Air Project Management Group will seek unanimous support to maximise the chances of support from Environment Ministers and the Senior Officials Group. Each jurisdiction's opinion on the recommended priority can be conveyed in the paper.
- The Senior Officials Group endorses the paper and transmits it to Environment Ministers for consideration.
- Environment Ministers make a decision and the Agreement's work plan is updated accordingly.
 - A high level explanation of the decision would be conveyed through the Meeting of Environment Ministers agreed statement. This may include why other air quality issues were not considered priorities under the Agreement at that stage.

Decisions, implementation and review— Step 5 to Step 7

This part of the process occurs following a decision by Environment Ministers to prioritise an air quality problem to be addressed under the Agreement.

Step 5: Options to manage

During this stage, investigative work will be undertaken by the lead/co-leads to develop options to address the air quality priority. Options considered may be relevant to one or several of the range of actions considered in the Agreement's scope, and may range from non-regulatory to regulatory options. They may also serve to address other identified (but not necessarily prioritised) air quality issues.

Some options may be simple and straightforward to implement. Others such as those that may explore regulatory measures will likely require a full examination of regulatory costs and benefits through a Regulation Impact Statement process, and public consultation. These would be undertaken according to established government processes, for example, through the Australian Government Office of Best Practice Regulation approach.

Step 6: Decisions taken—implement option/s

Following the necessary investigative work, recommended options would be put to Environment Ministers through the Senior Officials Group for a decision whether to implement the recommended option. Implementation of the option, if agreed, would then follow.

Step 7: Review of work plan and measures implemented

The Agreement is to be reviewed by Environment Ministers every two years to ensure that actions under the Agreement remain relevant and to maintain accountability for delivery. This does not preclude an action being completed or implemented ahead of this timeframe, nor priorities being identified for potential inclusion in the work plan in the interim.

The Air Project Management Group will track progress against each of the work plan items with a view to provide Environment Ministers with a review report documenting progress and any measured successes. The first full review report is due in December 2017, with a mid-term review report due in 2016.

Appendix 1

Desired Outcomes

- Human and environmental health outcomes are improved through actions implemented
- Communities are empowered to better deal with air pollution through greater awareness of air quality issues and access to reliable information
- Air quality policy development and implementation is underpinned by up-to-date and robust information and evidence.

Principles

- Actions will focus on addressing the most significant current and emerging air quality issues to protect the health of Australians and the environment.
- Policy decisions on new measures, whether regulatory or non-regulatory, will take account of human health, environmental, and economic considerations.
- Responses to air quality issues will apply best practice approaches, consider the latest evidence available and identify the most appropriate level of government to take the lead.
- Policy decisions are relevant, timely, consider available resources, and allow for effective consultation and appropriate lead-in times, balancing the interests of the community as well as businesses in this regard.
- Air quality management measures delivered are proportionate, efficient and effective, and avoid creating cumulative or overlapping regulatory burdens.
- Activities are consistent with Australia's international obligations.
- The Agreement and endorsed work plan are periodically reviewed to maintain a focus on achievement of desired outcomes and to ensure its continuing relevance.

Strategic Approaches/Scope

1. Standards ensure a consistent approach to: monitoring and reporting of air quality; and to reduce air pollution and limit emissions from certain sources. Governments will consider the need for, and enhancement of, existing standards as well as the need for any new standards for air quality management.
2. Emission reduction measures are targeted towards reducing air pollution and/or population exposure to air pollution, with associated health outcomes. Governments will consider options to manage or reduce emissions from priority sources.
3. Cooperation and partnerships have the capacity to complement government action to address air quality issues. Governments will seek to engage with business and the community to identify and foster partnership opportunities aimed at promoting and sustaining improved air quality outcomes.
4. Better knowledge, education and awareness are essential requirements to inform policy decisions and to help empower communities and individuals to better deal with air pollution. Knowledge, improved through information sharing and research, is critical to plug existing data gaps, identify future trends to help focus efforts in managing air quality, and explore innovative measures to address air pollution. Governments will promote a focus on approaches to enhance the information and evidence base as well as explore avenues to ensure the public has the best available air quality information.

