



If two's company, is three a crowd?

By Jacqueline Ong, Thursday 06 October 2016

By now, you may have noticed that there are ongoing discussions around whether our associations represent the interests of industry and if the various bodies should be harmonised.



In September, *Inside Waste* published [part one](#) of a part two series on association fragmentation and promised to unveil more in the October issue of the magazine.

The issue is now ready for [download](#) (more on the issue below and on that note, on page 14, the last dot point should read: Should be noted on invoices, in order to convey the extent of the levy to the waste generator; and to not be utilised to fund landfill infrastructure, so early initiators are not disadvantaged) and as promised, here is the highly anticipated part two of the series.

If two is company, is three a crowd?

It was reported earlier this year that Cleanaway had withdrawn from all associations, with CEO Vik Bansal calling for a single association to take the industry's views forward.

His take is that the sector has had a history of fragmentation, which does no one any favours, as it has led to inconsistent policies and practices by regulators across the country. What is needed, according to Bansal, is a "strong and cohesive voice".

Acknowledging that yes, the association space is indeed fragmented, Suez CEO and Waste Management Association of Australia (WMAA) board member of the peak membership category Mark Venhoek believes there is now an opportunity for alignment.

"We are a strong supporter of many associations but there is a clear need to get more alignment to ensure we have a strong and united voice as an industry," Venhoek said.

"While it's easy for us to say things need to change, it means we also must have a responsibility to co-design that evolution.

"WMAA has acknowledged the fact that they would like to strengthen the relationship with the industry and we definitely welcome that. We also are supportive of the proposal to have a framework where our state-based associations work together in partnership to support the development of our industry."

In September, *Inside Waste* [reported](#) that a meeting to examine the viability of setting up an "industry lead" association in SA based on the Waste Recycling Industry (WRI) model had been adjourned but discussions around the establishment of a national industry-led representative group that would harmonise a range of representatives such as Waste Contractors and Recyclers Association of NSW (WCRA) and the Victorian Waste Management Association (VWMA) to name a few, was ongoing.

The move appeared to be led by Waste Recycling Industry Queensland CEO Rick Ralph and waste veteran Max Spedding and the proposed "council" would "be the overall coordinating body for all state-based associations."

Setting the record straight

After news broke about the meeting in SA, *Inside Waste* ran a poll online asking readers if they supported the idea, particularly since it has been a long-held view that there were simply too many associations serving the waste and resource recovery sector.

11% of readers backed the plan, 48% said no, and 41% selected the "there are too many associations" option. One reader also commented that "there are too many old boys' clubs with a handful of members who pay a subscription that pays a wage to someone who supposedly represents their issues somewhere and allows those members an excuse to attend a function or seminar to catch up on old times."

"The representation of the waste industry across Australia is almost a joke. No wonder the decision makers in Parliament have a hard time understanding who to talk to and what they [the industry] want. The industry needs one powerful voice that can take the pressing issue of the day to the decision and law makers."

So perhaps the focus should move away from "there are too many associations" to "should we harmonise our voices".

Ralph told *Inside Waste* that was his focus, saying there were "lots of rumours out there", but what he wanted to do was develop "really good, coordinated approaches at a state level, because that's where the policy agenda and regulations are happening."

"There's certainly a view of the world that in the national context, there needs to be greater harmonisation. There's a general consensus in that space," Ralph said.

"I do concur with what Vik [Bansal] said earlier this year about the fractured approach. I think that's spot on. And I think governments and policy architects are masters at manipulating a fractured conversation. You see it repeatedly the way a government or regulator would bring something up and they would have consulted with one little element of the industry rather than the whole industry."

And Spedding has clarified that this new body or council would not take away from the good that state-based or other associations do, but would instead offer associate memberships to industry bodies that are "similar in nature" and ones that have an open call for membership.

However, some, including WCRA executive director Tony Khoury, questioned why we needed another association to do this when we have WMAA in the picture. Australian Organics Recycling Association (AORA) chair Paul Coffey agreed, asking: "If it is waste we are talking about, WMAA is a national organisation and quite honestly, why can't they do it?"

Khoury even suggested that WMAA take the lead and set up a forum for all associations and CEOs of the major waste players to "openly discuss and resolve these issues".

"If the concern is that we have too many waste and recycling associations or not enough in certain areas and we now have individuals all heading in different directions, then let's have an open discussion and attempt to get this right," Khoury said.

And WMAA national president Miranda Ransome thinks that "WMAA is well placed to facilitate this".

"WMAA has relationships with various groups but it's not our place to suggest how they operate, that is a matter for their members. The challenge, for every association, is maintaining relevance and value for your members. WMAA has always been willing to work with various groups and will continue to do so on issues albeit national or state-based," Ransome said.

Advocacy and training

Then, there are others who are of the view that WMAA represented "too broad a church" and could not effectively represent the industry's views.

"There is a magnificent opportunity for WMAA in professionalising the industry as a professional association," Australian Council of Recycling CEO Grant Musgrove said.

"I would encourage them to set up an RTO [registered training organisation] in the same way that CIWM [Chartered Institution of Wastes Management] does in the UK and you become a chartered waste practitioner. It's a huge market and we desperately need to professionalise the industry. That's how I see it - a bright future for WMAA."

Ransome says the association's "broad church" is just one facet of its strength.

"There's also depth and stability in our association that's been achieved over a long period of evolution. The result is that WMAA has strong support from the industry and is viewed as the peak industry body by government," she said.^[SEP]

"That's not to say it is perfect. WMAA is acutely aware of the desire on the part of some industry players for WMAA to be stronger in the advocacy space. The industry has seen WMAA's increased media presence and leadership in the public policy debate, and this is not going to change. It is clear that the industry is not just interested in networking and training. Advocacy is not a simple activity, especially if you are a "broad church", the challenge is in achieving a voice for different sections of our industry. That starts with achieving a consensus view, or framing a range of member views on specific issues, that'll be the challenge for Rick and Max's association.

"WMAA's structure enables advocacy at a state level through our state branches, on a national level through our divisions and through special interest groups. This structure will continue to evolve and WMAA will continue to work with members, including key industry members who are central to WMAA's makeup, to ensure all such parties have an effective voice under the WMAA umbrella, in addressing policy and other issues of significance to the industry."

East Waste general manager Adam Faulkner, who is also a non-executive director of WMAA, pointed to the association's SA branch, saying it has effectively engaged in high-level policy discussions.

"WMAA used to be seen as, we can't advocate, we can't agitate because we're speaking on behalf of too many people. But that's no longer live. We're mature enough now to say, ok, we may not all agree on this policy position but we can go and talk to a minister and put a point of view across that doesn't necessarily align with some of the other views. I think we've gotten past that and WMAA members can rest assured that we can advocate and agitate when the time is right," Faulkner said.

Horses for courses

Coffey said the sector's different associations have "worked fine for many years" and that the need to have national representation seemed to be driven by the big multinational companies.

"I think that we already have national representation. AORA is a national organisation with state divisions and whilst we're a national organisation, the states have to have some flexibility but certainly all have their own parochial attitudes which win lose or draw, it's part of what they do to achieve the best for their members in that state," Coffey said.

"In my view one of the most important assets to our industry members is representation at a state level, you can have state organisations that cooperate like WCRA and service their members very effectively. You've

got to be careful that you don't stand up and profess the need for a national organisation if that organisation can't deal with the differing needs at the state level including state legislation and disposal philosophies.

"There is little doubt that each industry sector has different needs at both a state and national level which I do not believe can be well serviced simply at a national level".

VWMA executive officer Andrew Tytherleigh says he does not have a problem with the number of associations across the country because even if they operate independently, there is an ability to coordinate and discuss issues across state boundaries, which is what VWMA does.

Like Coffey, Tytherleigh agreed that at the end of the day, each state is responsible for its own waste management, requiring state-specific representation.

"We don't have a problem with industry associations representing members' views. And if members in SA or wherever they might be feel they need representation or assistance to get their voice to government and the best way is to form a local industry association then I've got no problem with that. It's about representing your members' interests," he said.

It's horses for courses, says Musgrove.

"If you are in the resource recovery and recycling game, then ACOR's your home. If you're in the landfillers game, then you've got ALOA. If you're in both, you're an integrated waste management company, then it's typical practice for the appropriate senior management staff to be members of both associations," Musgrove said.

"ACOR is a national association covering all jurisdictions with a distinctive agenda. I get along well with all other industry associations. I don't view them as competitors, I view them as professional colleagues and it works well. It's really horses for courses."

While all that makes sense, what about lobbying on the federal level? Again, the question comes back to, do we have an effective national voice?

Spedding told *Inside Waste* that on state-based issues, such as container deposit schemes and landfill levies, perhaps there is little need for a national perspective.^[1]_[SEP]

"But then you have an issue that comes up like the proximity principle and waste being transported to Queensland and all of a sudden, you need a national view. There's no organisation that can coordinate the development of a national position," Spedding said.

"We currently lack a single and effective industry body to represent the key interests of the waste management and recycling industry. It isn't constructive to deal with a number of competing bodies who each represent parts of the industry, or small regions, without a nationally approved and aligned agenda," Bansal added.

"What isn't working at the moment is a genuine lack of cohesiveness in our approach to the strategic headwinds facing our industry. It is far better for all of us, if one, representative body is able to discuss and challenge some of the fundamental issues we face, on everyone's behalf, instead of issues being addressed through disaggregated soundbites across the country."

It is the view of some that do so may require more than just a national organisation.

"Like a lot of industry associations, to lobby the federal government, you need to be in Canberra. I used to work in the federal Environment Department in Canberra as a federal bureaucrat in waste policy so I know how the Commonwealth plays in that space," Tytherleigh said.

"They have very limited powers in waste so what they can do is provide leadership, they can provide guidance, they can provide an overall framework for waste policy but in terms of actual actions on the ground, they are very limited because like everything, the state controls through their EPAs, through state-based legislation and regulation.

"Among some of the national members, the larger companies, they're very much focussed on well, we think there should be a harmonisation of waste laws and no one would disagree with that, but to actually get states to all agree to deal with hazardous waste in a similar way or recycling targets, I think it's probably going to be a long-term strategic objective. In the meantime, you've got to deal with what you've got. And our members deal with that on a day-to-day basis. We have to provide that advice and assistance on a day-to-day basis."

What's the deal?

As discussions are ongoing and there are a range of interests amongst the various stakeholders, the association issue has become something of a moveable feast.

At press time, Spedding told *Inside Waste* he had met with Ransome and WMAA national vice president Tony Kortegast to discuss the possibility of two national associations, one focussing on knowledge transfer, and the other on advocacy.

"If WMAA looked at all the circumstances and discussed, what have we got that can't change? That's basically those state and specialist organisations, which are well established and entrenched, so you've got them on one side. Can you have one organisation that handles the broad church issues that are in WMAA and also one that handles the more focussed issues that exist in the industry? Is there a way to pull that together?" Spedding said.

Ultimately, WMAA is seeking a collaborative approach, with Ransome saying it's not a competition and that it is WMAA's desire that any new association works with, rather than instead of, WMAA.

Inside Waste will continue to keep an eye on developments in this space and perhaps Ralph is quite right, that "the conversation that is being held is very healthy. It shows there's a general need for everyone to start talking and whatever evolves, will evolve."

However, Musgrove offered a piece of advice.

"Governments are noting this very public conversation and if this conversation needs to occur, I would prefer for it to be done in a discreet and professional manner. I have seen this in other sectors and it became incredibly painful, unproductive, led to bad blood and damaged the sector's reputation and credibility to government. This could set industry back for years," he said.

Also featured in the October issue:

- **Tackling the world's ticking consumption time bomb:** According to ACOR CEO Grant Musgrove, policy in Australia as well as business responses to environmental policy have so far focused on what has been the least of the country's problems. At a time when waste generation is increasing exponentially, it is time for the country to make waste generation an environmental and business problem.
- **Managing Australia's material streams:** At the Australasian Waste and Recycling Expo (AWRE) in August, a seminar on day two - Visions for Future Battery Recycling - quickly turned into a discussion about mandated national product stewardship schemes, or the lack thereof, in Australia. Where is the country at when it comes to product stewardship? This infographic aims to provide a snapshot of some of the programs currently running in the country, how they are faring, and what materials are in the government's sight.
- **NSW council amalgamations - lessons, trends, considerations:** On May 12, 19 newly amalgamated NSW councils began operations and there are a number of pending merger proposals. *Inside Waste* turned to two local government experts - one who specialises in local government waste contracts and tenders, and the other in the field of law - to get an idea of what issues councils should be aware of, how to overcome them, and lessons that they could learn from amalgamated councils.

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