

CUAC Rural and Regional Network Newsletter

February 08

Gas, water and electricity consumer issues in rural and regional areas

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STOP PRESS:

CUAC staffer Tosh (Anthony) Szatow is taking part in the 2008 Oxfam Walk, a 100km walk designed to raise awareness and funding for Oxfam's activities.

Find out more or make donations at the following site. Your support is greatly appreciated.

<http://www2.oxfam.org.au/trailwalker/Melbourne/team/449>

As the drought and other factors put increasing pressure on energy and water costs, the importance of engaged and aware consumers increases. Because the utilities sector can be complex, it is easy for the average consumer to overlook the importance of such things as the AEMC review of retail competition, or the current review of the concessions framework. This edition we outline some concerns around these, and other important reviews, along with some positive water and energy initiatives around rural and regional Victoria.

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CUAC is an independent consumer advocacy organisation which ensures the interests of Victorian electricity, gas and water consumers—especially low income, disadvantaged, rural and regional, and Indigenous consumers—are effectively represented in the policy and regulatory debate.

CUAC believes all Victorians have a right to:

- ♦ affordable and sustainable electricity, gas and water
- ♦ have their interests heard in policy and regulatory decisions on electricity, gas and water
- ♦ not be disconnected from electricity, gas and/or water due solely to an inability to pay



Views expressed in the newsletter are not necessarily those of CUAC.

ESC Water Price Review

Kerry Connors
CUAC Executive Officer

Decisions on water pricing must ensure affordable access to water for all Victorians, CUAC has argued in a submission to the Essential Services Commission (ESC).

Rural and regional water prices are now being considered by ESC, the economic regulator.

In December, the ESC released an Issues Paper summarising the key features and concerns of the Water Plans lodged by each rural and regional water authority.

Under the aegis of the CUAC Reference Group, RM Consulting Group was awarded a CUAC Partnership Grant to assess the customer impacts of the water plans. That research was released in December and received quite a bit of attention from rural and regional Victorians, as well as informing CUAC's submission. (The research is available on CUAC's website.)

In its submission, CUAC argued that water is an essential service and access to it a basic human right.

We recommended that the ESC incorporate the following principles into its consideration of water prices:

- that customers should not be faced with price shocks;
- that price increases are allocated equitably between classes of consumers;
- that all companies must take active steps to develop and implement comprehensive hardship programs to minimise the impacts of future price rises;
- that water businesses must keep capital and operating expenditure to the minimum, to ensure price increases are kept as low as possible;
- that there needs to be tighter control of additional expenditure in this next regulatory period, with no expenditure to be rolled into prices without prior formal approval from the ESC, and that the impact on household prices should be a key factor in determining a materiality threshold.; and
- that price rises to residential consumers should be capped at an agreed maximum level. Any costs above this level should be recovered from state government funding.

We also made the following recommendations in relation to the Water Plans of the following water companies:

Gippsland Water

- The costs of the proposed Water Factory should



be recovered from the major water users in the region not from the wider residential customer base, in line with standard cost and price allocation policies.

- The costs of any additional supply augmentation should be deferred until the next price setting period.

GWMWater

- A final decision on the prices for GWMWater should be deferred until funding for the pipeline is confirmed.
- The resultant price path should be smoothed to reduce impacts from a price shock in year one.

Barwon Water

- The operating cost impacts of the new pipeline from Melbourne should be subject to formal review and their price impacts deferred until the next price period

Central Highlands Water

- The ESC establish formal robust procedures for the authorisation of works beyond those approved in the price determination.
- The price path be smoothed with less of a price shock in year 1.
- Projects are not approved until external funding approval has been obtained.

Coliban Water

- Future additions to expenditure be subject to prior approval from the ESC.
- The price path be less front-loaded.

Wannon Water

- A simpler tariff structure should be developed with broad bands to reflect those customers that receive broadly similar levels of service.

The next stage of the price determination in which consumers can participate will be the ESC's Draft Decision, to be released in early March.

Energy concessions threatened

By May Mauseth Johnson
CUAC Senior Policy Officer

CUAC is concerned that a review of concessions currently underway may lead to capping or restricting access to concessions for Victorian consumers.

The scheduled steep increases in water prices, and the Government's commitment to adjust water concessions to alleviate the impact on Victorian households have sparked a review of the Victorian concessions framework. There have been no public reports or consultation papers released with the review.

We understand that the Government is considering the following options for cost cutting: capping the maximum discount available, restricting eligibility or combining several concessions into one single payment.

On 1 February the Herald Sun reported that the three main options being considered by Treasury were:

- 1) Capping energy concessions - continuing with a 17.5 per cent discount on energy bills, but applying a maximum limit to the total amount of the discount.
- 2) Bundling various concessions by providing concession card holders with fixed amount vouchers that can be used to discount the service of their choice.
- 3) Restricting access to concessions by denying part-pensioners with pensioner cards access to key concessions on services.

CUAC is deeply concerned about the possibility of the Government reducing eligibility and/or capping the winter energy concession in order to fund the cost increases to water concessions.

Affordable Living Alliance

CUAC has recently joined the Affordable Living Alliance, an alliance initiated by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) that aims to ease the hardship of low to middle income households by encouraging Government action to reduce the costs of essential items.

The cost of essential items in Victoria has skyrocketed and many low to middle income households are being pushed into financial stress. The Alliance ar-



gues that the Victorian Government plays a critical role assisting households to afford essential items and services through the provision of concessions for energy and water, rates, transport and health costs, such as ambulance fees.

Recent cost pressures placed on Victorian households include:

- In June 2008, Victorian water prices will rise from 13 -17%
- In January 2007, electricity prices increased by between 14 -17%
- Fresh fruit and vegetables rose 9.3% in the year to December 2007
- Petrol has increased over 35% in the year to February 2008
- Victorian rents increased 9.2% in real terms in the 12 months to June 2007
- Melbourne house prices rose 25% in 2007

The Affordable Living Alliance was formally launched on 14 February and its first campaigning issue is to ensure that the concessions provided to 1.2 million Victorians will not be eroded in the May budget. ⁱ

A broad range of community sector agencies have joined the Alliance, including the Council on the Aging, Consumer Action Law Centre, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria, Tenants Union Victoria, Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services, Carers Victoria, Berry Street, Uniting Church, Action on Disability within Ethnic Communities Inc, Anglicare Victoria, Carlton/Fitzroy Financial Counselling Service, Catholic Social Services Victoria, Council of Single Mothers and their Children, MS Australia, National Disability Services Victoria, Port Phillip Community Group, Spinal Cure

Australia, Unitingcare – Kildonan and Wesley Mission Melbourne.

The options discussed

CUAC is deeply concerned about the possibility of the Government reducing eligibility and/or capping the winter energy concession in order to fund the cost increases to water concessions.

Recent Government-approved price increases and future cost drivers such as the roll out of interval meters to all Victorian households means that concession card holders will rely heavily on the percentage based Winter Energy Concession to be able to heat their homes to adequate levels.

We believe the three main cost cutting alternatives (restricting eligibility, bundling and capping) considered by the Government are unfeasible as well as harmful to Victorian households. Firstly, determin-

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ing concession card eligibility is a federal responsibility and as such it would be difficult, as well as administratively expensive, for the Victorian Government to deny part-pensioners access to concessions.

Secondly, bundling various concessions into a single assistance payment would result in a program that undermines the actual purpose of the scheme – to assist low income households to access and afford essential services in order to secure participation in social and economic life and provide a basis for a fair and safe society.ⁱⁱ By definition, a bundled concession would not be directed at alleviating the cost of a particular service. A bundled payment would lessen the pressure to ensure that the level of assistance is determined in relation to the cost of the service – so the need to increase the concession amount would not be as clear to government as individual

bills rise. Such an arrangement could arguably be regarded as an income support measure rather than a concession due to its inability to ensure that particular services remain affordable.

Thirdly, capping the Winter Energy Concession would have a detrimental impact on many households. The Victorian Concession program already includes some capped concessions and we have seen how assistance levels erode over time because the caps are not adjusted to reflect price increases. Furthermore, a capped energy concession would result in inequity between urban and rural consumers. Currently Melbourne water customers get more assistance than rural and regional consumers – who have higher average annual bills – because water concessions are capped. As most of rural Victoria does not have access to reticulated gas they tend to have higher winter electricity consumption than urban households using a mix of gas and electric appliances. A capped concession would simply result in reduced assistance to households with high consumption. Rural households, who already pay more for their energy, are one of the groups we know would be worse off under a capped arrangement.

Members of the Affordable Living Alliance fear the concessions review will disadvantage many low income households.

CUAC will continue to express concern about the review and potential impacts on low income Victorians and rural households in particular, in the lead-up to the State budget.

With the current cost pressures on Victorian households and continuous price increases of energy and water, low income Victorians need increased support and the current practice of capping water concessions must cease in order to ensure that households are able to pay for their water supply in the future.

i. See article ‘Aid cut to poor feared’ in the Herald Sun, 11/02/08

ii. See Concessions Unit’s report *State concessions and hardship programs 2005-2006*

The Smart Water Fund and the Alternative Technology Association (ATA) have launched a water saving guide book with recommendations of how to reduce drinking water in and around the home by 96 per cent.

***Water not down the drain:
a guide to using rainwater and greywater at home,***
provides homeowners with a practical step by step guide to creating water smart homes using rainwater and greywater.

See the ATA website, www.ata.org.au .

Retail Competition Review – CUAC’s Response

By **Kerry Connors**
CUAC Executive Officer

CUAC is concerned the Victorian Government will be making decisions on the future of energy markets based on a report with serious shortcomings.

The Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC) released its report on the effectiveness of competition in Victoria on 19 December 2007, recommending the removal of retail price regulation.

CUAC was disappointed at the tenor of the AEMC Report – its analysis of costs and benefits in relation to regulation seemed to be focused on the interests of businesses, not consumers.

Scope of analysis only short-term

We also strongly disagreed with the AEMC’s conclusion that competition is sufficiently effective to remove retail price regulation. Our concern is driven largely by the failure of the Commission’s analysis to do anything more than provide a snapshot of the level and nature of competition in the Victorian energy market at this point in time, and does not take into account the ways in which this market will become more complex in the short-term. As we noted in an earlier submission:

The Victorian market will change significantly following the roll-out of smart meters – the push for more complex tariffs is inevitable, requiring consumers to understand in detail the level and type of their consumption...In addition, the introduction of an emissions trading system will place upward pressure on prices – which are already under pressure from wholesale market constraints.

Making power more expensive for low-income consumers

CUAC perceives the main risk to consumers with the Commission’s proposed approach is that it creates a powerful incentive for retailers to make the standing offer their most expensive product, creating a number of less than desirable consequences.

It enables retailers to load costs into the standing offer to discount other products, as has happened in other sectors such as banking and telecommunications, where low-use subsidise high-volume consumers.

And as the obligation to offer supply is tied to the standing offer, the most disadvantaged consumers will

pay the highest price. Those consumers who by virtue of their income or credit rating depend on the standing offer to ensure access to an essential service are the consumers who will be most disadvantaged by this approach.

The Commission neither acknowledges nor offers a solution to either of these probabilities, which present real risks to low-income and disadvantaged consumers.

Not providing enough information to consumers to enable them to compare

Another problem with the AEMC’s recommendations is that, despite its own evidence that energy consumers rely heavily on energy retailers for information, the AEMC has offered few solutions to address that information asymmetry.

Consumers need to be confident that they have chosen the best product available to them. The goal of regulation should be to ensure consumers can effectively exercise choice and encourage competition on price, not to facilitate hundreds of unpublicized tariffs in the name of innovation.

Of major concern to CUAC is the requirement that only standing offers be published, which in effect will serve only to exacerbate the already serious information asymmetries in the market.

The customer survey conducted by the AEMC made very clear that customers rely primarily on the retailer for information – at point of sale, the customer is not going to receive any information except about the product on offer. That situation does not equate to an ‘informed and active consumer’, a criteria crucial for effective competition.

If all product prices were published, consumers would be able to more easily identify and compare offers to find the product that best suits their need, and commercial and/or public comparison services could be developed that would provide independent advice to consumers to facilitate a choice that maximizes their welfare.

While publishing all tariffs may run a risk of price coordination, we believe that the trade-off in empowering consumers will create a much stronger market and facilitate and promote competition. The Victorian Government must now make its decision on whether it accepts the AEMC’s analysis and recommendations – we hope that they will empower consumers, to build an energy market that is truly competitive.

New Energy Hardship Resource and Training

Consumer Affairs Victoria has published a valuable resource on Energy Hardship, for agencies working with people who have difficulties paying their energy bills.

The resource kit was launched on 14 February by the Minister for Consumer Affairs, the Honourable Tony Robinson and the Minister for Energy and Resources, the Honourable Peter Batchelor.

It contains information on energy concessions, grants, loans and other support, contact information for energy companies and other services, as well as background information on how Victorian and national energy arrangements work.

Energy Hardship: A Guide for Agencies will be provided as part of a training package for financial counselors and other welfare workers dealing with people having problems paying their energy bills.

Workshops are being run by Community Information Victoria on behalf of CAV in metropolitan and regional Victoria until May 2008.

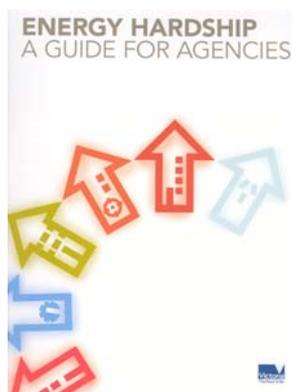
Topics covered include:

- The Victorian Energy Retail Code, relevant legislation and the Victorian energy market.
- Complaints and the Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria (EWOV)
- Field energy audits and energy efficiency advice
- Working out the best strategic combination of options for paying.
- Retailer hardship policies, programs and processes.

Workshops scheduled for March include the Western Metropolitan and North Eastern Region on 4 March, and Ballarat and Bendigo on 12 March.

For more information contact Consumer Affairs Victoria on 1300 55 81 81 or visit www.consumer.vic.gov.au.

For bookings contact CIVic on phone 03 9672-2002 (Monday to Thursday) or go to www.civ.org.au



Northern region water strategy

The State Government is calling for input into a discussion paper on the future of water in the northern region.

The 'Northern Region Sustainable Water Strategy' describes future challenges to water supplies, and identifies possible measures to address these challenges.

The climate scenarios used in the Discussion Paper have been developed by the Department of Sustainability and Environment using input from CSIRO data.

Some options explored in the Discussion Paper include:

- Greater use or further reform of the water market
- Improving and modifying the allocation and management of water to benefit farmers, industry, towns and the environment
- Further modernization of the distribution system
- Further water conservation including on-farm efficiency
- Refining environment management
- Pricing
- Further expansion and integration of the Water Grid
- Accessing new sources of water including groundwater, recycled water and stormwater.

The strategy aims to guide future planning for the next 50 years.

A consultative committee has been established to consider community submissions, including representatives of:

- Regional water corporations
- Catchment management authorities
- Local government
- The Murray-Darling Basin Commission
- Environment Victoria
- Australian Conservation Foundation
- Victoria Farmers Federation and
- Northern Victorian Irrigators.

Written submissions to the discussion paper are due by 29 February 2008, with a draft strategy to be released mid-year.

The paper can be seen at www.dse.vic.gov.au.

Case studies show regional energy innovation

Victorian rural and regional groups are demonstrating real innovation in improving energy and water supplies for their communities, according to a draft report funded by CUAC.

The report, compiled by the Alternative Technology Association, brings together case studies of successful initiatives in alternative energy and water supplies.

A broad range of drivers exists for these innovative projects, ranging from issues of access, reliability or affordability, to a focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, or increasing availability of water due to climate change.

Case studies documented include:

The Hepburn Community Wind Park

The Wind Park will be the first community-owned wind energy facility in the country. It was developed by the Hepburn Renewable Energy Association, which came together as a community group concerned about sustainability issues.

The report found that ‘the Hepburn/Daylesford Community Wind Park project has the potential to be a template for the establishment of viable distributed renewable energy generation in Australia.’

Project Aquarius

Central Highlands Water commenced Project Aquarius in February 2007 with the aim of retrofitting 5,000 households in the Ballarat area over the next two years with water efficient shower heads, tap flow controllers, and cistern weights, as well as fixing leaks, all at minimum cost. The net cost to the householder after DSE rebate is \$30, and total installations recently topped 1800 – almost 40% of the target reached in the first 6 months.



The report says this is ‘a model to enable communities to enjoy efficiency gains and cost savings from lower water and power consumption for a very low outlay’.

Maldon Farm Water Supply

Water pumped from reopened mines is being used at the local prison, community facilities and to water stock at farms in the immediate area, thus easing the pressure on town water.

The report finds that though this is a localised example, ‘it is indicative of the kind of valuable community initiative that lateral thinking and an awareness of local needs and conditions can create’.



Shipwreck Coast Geothermal Energy and Water

Mantra Deep Blue Resort near Warrnambool is using geothermal hot water for everyday heating, as well as for its spa baths. The water is used for hydronic heating in the resort’s 200 radiators. Once it has passed through the private baths, it is then transferred for use as groundwater. In winter, the water is expected to power all the heating needs of the eco-friendly resort.

The report finds that an opportunity exists for suitably located communities in cooperation with experts to pursue development and ownership models for geothermal bores to provide heating and supplementary water.

Biogas Power Generation

In the Goulburn Valley, Diamond Energy has invested in a plant to capture gas produced by the treatment of human and commercial waste and exploit its energy value. They have installed a biogas generation plant capable of producing around 1 megawatt (MW) of electricity from the methane collected from GVW’s Tatura HRAL ponds – sufficient to power around 1,000 homes.

The report says: ‘That a complex and groundbreaking project of this type has succeeded to the point of sustainable energy generation from biogas is a tribute to the determination and spirit of cooperation that has obviously evolved between Goulburn Valley Water and Diamond Energy over the last three years.’

Hopetoun Sustainability Audit

National Centre for Sustainability at Ballarat University, on behalf of the Hopetoun region, obtained a grant from Sustainability Victoria to ex-

plore Hopetoun's current and projected power demand and investigate potential local renewable energy alternatives. This includes collecting solar access and wind speed data, assessing biomass potential, and developing a model of community management for other communities to apply.

The report finds: 'one of the key success factors in getting the sustainability audit of the ground would have to be the community itself, which has over the years demonstrated its willingness and ability to act together to solve problems and manage issues affecting the town. It can be expected that if a viable renewable power source can be identified, the town community will again rally together to implement the project as effectively as possible'.

Energy Services Provider Model – Ararat

Ararat Council is supported a trial of scheme whereby a private company provides sustainability measures to a household for an ongoing fee. This eliminates the need for otherwise substantial upfront cost for measures such solar hot water tanks. It is expected that the ongoing service fee will be offset by the energy or water saving, and as such the consumer, although not saving as much as if they were able to afford the unit outright, should in most cases be financially better off than without the service.

The report finds that 'If the business model proves attractive to consumers and financially viable, it could be replicated by community groups or councils in order to provide low-cost and economical renewable energy to low income consumers who would otherwise not be able to access the benefits due to the large up-front costs'.

Wastewater projects in rural areas, the formation of community groups, and less successful attempts at lobbying are also covered.

The aim of the case studies is to promote successful community-driven and supported water and energy projects to a variety of community, media and government stakeholders. This will highlight the benefits and feasibility of such initiatives, as well as informing future policy discussions.

Some of the issues facing these sorts of projects are raised, in particular: financial issues; planning considerations; and, for larger renewable energy projects, regulatory and structural barriers in a market that assumes power will be generated in a few large remote locations and transmitted over large distances.

The report is currently being finalised and will soon be available on the CUAC website.

Solar Survey

The Alternative Technology Association has published results of a survey of people who own solar energy (photo voltaic or PV) systems.

Rural and regional consumers made up 59% of the people surveyed.

The sample population was taken from the ATA membership base of 4000, and 4000 randomly chosen beneficiaries of the Photovoltaic Rebate Programme and Renewable Remote Power Generation Programme.

The research showed that a 'good impact on the environment', in particular climate change and water scarcity, was the main reason for people acquiring a PV system (78%). Reflecting this concern, PV system owners tended to have a high rate of other sustainable practices such as choosing GreenPower and practicing energy conservation.

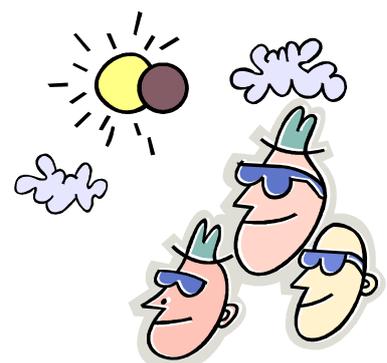
Though environmental reasons were key to many users uptake of solar energy, 70% of respondents believed that financial incentives were important in stimulating more people to adopt solar. The large majority of PV systems owners had claimed rebates, but many had not heard of Renewable Energy Certificates (redeemable certificates representing the quantity of emissions avoided by the generation of renewable energy.)

ATA recommended that the financial issues around PV be further explored to determine what incentives would achieve the best results for PV uptake, and how to provide information on these schemes to the public.

On the whole owners were very satisfied with their experience of their PV systems. Dissatisfaction generally came from technical problems such as installation issues or incorrect capacity.

ATA also found that clear processes for connecting to the grid and securing a retail agreement was important in overcoming frustration of people proposing grid-connection.

The report is available at the ATA website, www.ata.org.au





EWOV stats

Loddon Shire is in the top five for energy and water cases reported to the Ombudsman, for the second year in a row.

The Electricity and Water Ombudsman Victoria (EWOV) has released figures for complaints analysed by shire and council areas, per head of population. City of Melbourne has the highest level of cases, followed by Loddon Shire, Pyrenees Shire, Moorabool Shire and the Rural City of Swan Hill. Full details of EWOV figures are available in the EWOV Annual Report on the website, www.ewov.com.au

Largest wind farm signed off

Pacific Hydro Pty Ltd has been given development approval to build the Cape Nelson South Wind Energy Facility, south of Portland. The project will be Australia's largest wind farm.

It will involve the construction of 22 generators which will provide 44 megawatts (MW) to Victoria's electricity grid when completed.

Waratah Bay seweraged

A \$3.2 million sewerage and wastewater treatment scheme has been opened in Waratah Bay. The sewerage system is unique as it can operate without a town water supply. About 120 local properties and the 130 site caravan park have been connected to the new sewerage system.

Appliance advice

A new government program will help consumers choose energy and water efficient appliances. The ResourceSmart retail initiative will be focused on decisions shoppers make in-store about appliance purchases. Retail sales staff will be trained to help customers with energy efficiency advice, there will be in-stores brochures and easy to use calculators showing the greenhouse gas and water savings made by choosing higher efficiency products. Participating retailers include AGL Energy, Beacon Lighting, Bunnings, Camberwell Electrics, Clive Peeters, EL-GAS, The Good Guys, Harvey Norman, Kleenmaid, Mitre 10 and Origin Energy. Retailers will work with Sustainability Victoria to track sales of efficient appliances.

Bendigo recycles water

Bendigo's new 'water factory' at the Bendigo Water Reclamation Plant at Epsom will soon be supplying more than four billion litres of high quality recycled water a year for public gardens and sporting

grounds, and rural irrigation. The first stage of the \$41 million Epsom to Spring Gully Recycled Water Project has been critical in saving the Queen Elizabeth Oval and Rosalind Park Precinct. The second stage of the recycled water project is due to be completed in March. The project has been jointly funded by the Victorian Government, Coliban Water and the Federal Government.

Charlton water use

A project in Charlton will see bore water and rain water used for community and recreation facilities. The works will include connecting a pump to an existing emergency water point in the Charlton Recreation Reserve, and connecting a pipe to water the Charlton Travellers Rest, the Pony Club, Bowling Club, Croquet, Golf and Angling clubs. The project is partly funded through the Small Towns Development Fund.

Castlemaine employers to reduce greenhouse gases

Four major employers in Castlemaine will investigate ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and become more energy efficient with the help of a \$50,000 grant from the State government's Planning for Change program.

KR Castlemaine, Flowserve, Victoria Carpets and Mount Alexander Hospital are part of the Maine's Power project supporting Mount Alexander Shire Council's aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent by 2010. With the help of the grant they will develop an action plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, become more energy efficient and better manage their supply and peak loading capacity. Other project partners include Powercor, SP AusNet, Sustainability Victoria, the Mt. Alexander Shire Council and the Central Victorian Area Consultative Committee. The project is also supported through CSIRO's Sustainable Communities Initiative.

Small Grants

A grants program for small rural Australian communities will offer about \$850,000 a year in grants to benefit people in rural and remote communities. Applications from communities with a population of 10,000 or less will receive priority. Grants will be made in amounts up to \$5000 for projects that offer clear public benefit. Guidelines and application forms can be downloaded at www.frrr.org.au or email info@frrr.org.au.

Focus on Mildura: Snapshot

Where?

Mildura is situated in the northwest of Victoria,. The wider Mildura Swan Hill region known as Sunraysia borders New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria.

What?

The climate of Mildura is classified as warm and persistently dry. The average rainfall total is 292 mm

The area's key primary industries are horticulture and viticulture, while cereal and wool production is strong in the dry land areas. Tourism is a major industry, with the proximity of the Murray River and well known restaurants and wineries, annual festivals, and national parks.

Who?

Mildura has a population of about 50,000.

About 3% or 1500 people identify as indigenous.

About 13.7% of the population works in agriculture, forestry and fishing and a similar amount in retail; about 10% in manufacturing and a similar amount in health care.

Utilities:

Gas

Natural Gas was supplied to the City of Mildura and the towns of Irymple and Red Cliffs in 1999. A transmission pipeline supplies the region with natural gas sources from the Cooper Basin in northern South Australia.

Electricity

Powercor is the electricity distribution network service provider.

Water

Lower Murray Water (LMW) is responsible for the treatment and delivery of potable water for urban use, as well as managing the central infrastructure for capturing and delivering water for irrigation.

First Mildura Irrigation Trust (FMIT) has functions including 'to provide, manage and operate systems for the supply of water to irrigable lands and for the appropriate drainage and protection of those lands.'

Goulburn Murray Water provides bulk water supplies to FMIT and LMW and is responsible for managing the locks and weirs on the River Murray, and the major salt interception schemes on behalf of the Murray Darling Basin Commission.

Interview: Paul Geering, Sunraysia TAFE

When Paul Geering set up a stall with a second hand wind turbine at the Sunraysia Sun Festival, he generated a lot more than a few watts of power.

He was swamped by interested people asking ‘where can I get one?’

Paul, the Project Officer for Sustainability and teacher of plumbing at Sunraysia TAFE, had bought the wind powered generator on eBay for use at the house he was building for himself. But from this unlikely beginning, a committed and growing group of people interested in bulk-buying sustainable products has formed.

‘It was all word of mouth,’ says Paul. ‘The initial group was 12 or 14 people. Now it’s more like 65 or 70 and evolving every day.’

The principles of the group are very simple. Like-minded people connect, mostly on email. They work together to do the research on products, then compare notes. When they have decided on their purchase, they can approach manufacturers with a bulk order and see what is the best deal they can get.

Paul emphasizes the benefits of sharing knowledge as well as getting discounts.

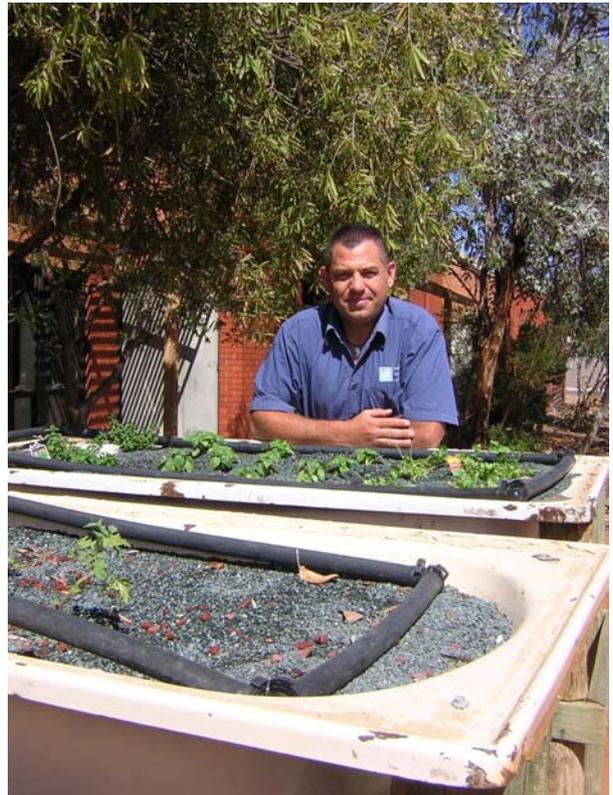
‘Some of the manufacturers are brilliant-minded, but they are ‘tech-heads’ that don’t understand customer service,’ he says. Paul can explain things to the group in plain English. ‘I can look at someone’s energy bill and quickly tell them which system they need to install.’

The first group has already made substantial savings on purchase of solar panels. A particular system from Zen Technologies which was valued at \$16,000 and which would usually have cost about \$8000 after rebates, was made available to members of the group with a discount of over \$2000 because they purchased ten units.

The group examined various systems and manufacturers, but was impressed with the Zen system’s wireless remote LCD screen which shows how much power the panels were generating at any time.

Paul is optimistic that solar power will become even more popular, with recent developments in South Australia whereby consumers can sell excess solar electricity back into the grid, and expectations that other states will follow suit.

‘It could become the only appliance that is going to make you money,’ he says.



Cont. over

After its success with PV panels and current plans to buy 1000 solar hot water systems he is also hoping to get into grey water systems, rainwater tanks and even electric cars.

He is negotiating with a company in Queensland for a blackwater system, for a discount of over 30% if they order five or more, and an electric car company has suggesting possible savings of up to \$15,000 for bulk orders.

‘It’s saving a penny, and saving the environment,’ he says. ‘It’s a win-win.’

Paul would like to see the group grow to 1000 members, but wants to maintain the simple concept.

‘I would like to see it stay a community group, not an organisation,’ he says. ‘If you become an organisation you can end up with on-costs. We don’t want to complicate it.’ However, he is looking into the possibility of students at the College developing a Web page for the group.

Because of the simplicity of the model, Paul sees no limits to the opportunities for this sort of group. It could easily work to bulk-order energy efficient appliances, for example.

There is great enthusiasm for the environment in the city, he says. ‘They *want* to be sustainable up here in Mildura’.

Paul fell in love with the town about three years ago, after going there for a holiday. ‘I looked around the town and said, that’s it, I’m looking for a job here.’

The job soon came up, teaching at Sunraysia TAFE, and Paul has not looked back since. But he has a wide range of interests in the sustainability area.

Another of his current interests is aquaponics, a combination of aquaculture and hydroponics whereby the waste from the fish in a tank is used to supply food to the plant system, which cleans the water for reuse. The plants flourish, the system produces fresh fish and vegetables, and it requires ‘just a bucketful of water a week to top it up’. The idea brings an ‘integrated team effort’ across the TAFE College, he says, from Business Management to agriculture.

His latest idea is ‘permablitz’, where groups of people would set up permaculture in each others backyards as a kind of ‘Backyard Blitz’ model with a sustainability base.

Paul is happy to talk to others about any of these projects, and can be contacted by email on paulg@onehundredtimes.com.au.

For information on Sunraysia TAFE call 5022 3666.

Stormwater and Recycled Water Grants

Business, local councils and community groups can apply for a share of \$10 million in grants for new stormwater and recycled water projects. The Stormwater and Urban Recycling Fund will provide funding for large scale and smaller projects where drinking quality water is not needed.

The \$6 million first round of the Fund is open to all non-residential water customers that use more than 10 million litres per year.

Businesses and local councils have until 24 April to register an expression of interest. Details can be found at www.dse.vic.gov.au or by calling 136 186.

Another round of funding will be available for businesses, community groups and sporting clubs for smaller, localised projects.

