

Local government should engage on carbon emissions from waste

By Joe Pickin

APPLYING carbon policy to the waste sector was always going to be messy. The main issue is landfills, where uncertain quantities of organic carbon decays unpredictably and variably to methane, which may vent unobstructed or be oxidised to harmless.

The climate change bureaucrats had an unenviable task to build an accounting framework around this uncertainty and variability.

Unsurprisingly, lots of problems ensued for emissions from 'new' waste (covered by the National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting System, or NGERs, as well as the carbon pricing mechanism) and 'legacy' waste (covered by the Carbon Farming Initiative, or CFI).

One pleasing feature has been the government's willingness to receive feedback and to improve its systems over time.

Tighter definition of waste degradation behaviours, for example, followed legitimate complaints from operators of inert sites.

The option for local characterisation of climate zone was added in response to objections from particular landfills.

The recently released NGERs Determination for 2013-14 contains a new set of improvements that will benefit the waste sector and provide a much better match between emissions and liabilities.

The carbon content of individual loads of asbestos and soil can now be set at zero.

The carbon in shredder flock from metal recyclers can be worked out through testing instead of being frozen at an exaggerated value.

Major cuts have been made to the default emission factors for composting and for landfilled residues from alternative waste treatment.

The maximum acceptable efficiency rate for landfill gas capture has been increased for higher-order measurement methods. Each of these changes followed representations from the waste industry.

For all that, significant problems remain. One industry suggestion would have allowed landfill operators to apply a specific and measured emission factor to waste from local governments that have established a separate collection system for green and food waste.

The department said this couldn't be adopted this year – it needs to think about it.

At present, landfills have to apply either a default composition or an audited average for municipal waste they receive from all sources.

Essentially, the current system prevents landfill operators from passing on the price signal.

The CFI, too, has some major weaknesses for the waste sector. The carbon benefits of composting remain unrecognised.

The landfill baseline (the proportion of gas that must be collected to meet regulatory standards before credits are generated) has ended up a lucky dip, in which similar sites run by similar companies in similar ways are subject to baselines varying from 0% to over 70%, depending on a dizzying variety of factors.

Those clobbered at the high end of this range can potentially get a much lower number if they get the support of their local EPA.

Uncertainty over the carbon price has pushed these problems down some priority lists. The international price has collapsed, and new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is seeking to bring forward the date we link to that price. Coalition leader Tony Abbott has sworn to pull the pin altogether.

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The carbon price linked to NGERs calculations may be reduced, perhaps to zero, but annual reporting is likely to continue.

And, unless climate change science is wrong or a magical technology descends, we should expect, one day, the return of high carbon prices.

We should also care about the CFI. This financial year may be the only



Should landfills be able to apply a specific emissions factor to organic-free MSW?

chance to generate high-value credits for reducing emissions from legacy waste.

Thereafter, prices and yields may be too low to matter. This doesn't just apply to big landfills with methane capture systems.

A new CFI methodology is under development that will allow credits to be generated by oxidising methane using compost biofilters.

If this can be up and running this financial year – with sensible baselines – emissions could be reduced and money made by small landfills and composters.

streams and most of the landfills in Australia;

- solid waste is the biggest emission source under many councils' control;
- the hard work of many councils and communities to reduce the carbon content of their waste to landfill is not recognised by the NGERs;
- councils paid many tens of millions of dollars in carbon costs for landfilled wastes last year; and
- local government associations exist in every jurisdiction.

The Waste Management Association of Australia stands ready to work with local government in dealing with these issues, but direct representation would be best.

Work is needed to engage the state EPAs on CFI baselines, to develop a workable CFI methodology on methane oxidation using biofilters, and to get recognition for organic-depleted municipal waste in the NGERs.

We need to help to design systems that minimise emissions, that reflect the realities as closely as possible, that pass price signals to waste generators, and that can operate into the long-term.

Given that we may be battling climate change for a thousand years, it's worth the effort.

Dr Joe Pickin is a director of the consulting firm Blue Environment and chairs the WMAA national carbon division. Contact at joe.pickin@blueenvironment.com.au.