



## **EPA Response to the Report of the Lower Hunter Air Quality Community Research Project**

### **1. Overview**

The NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) commissioned Macquarie University in 2013 to develop and implement a community research project to:

- better engage a broader cross-section of the Lower Hunter community regarding air quality issues
- identify key issues concerning air quality in the Lower Hunter
- recommend actions to improve community awareness of and access to information on air quality.

The study engaged 395 participants in total, comprising of 210 interviewees and 185 focus group participants from the community in Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens, Maitland and Cessnock. Macquarie University delivered its final report, the Lower Hunter Air Quality Community Research Project, in November 2014.

The EPA values the report's findings and thanks the participants for their time and contributions. The results reveal the existence of complex and divergent perceptions about air quality in the Lower Hunter region and varying levels of concern and knowledge pertaining to air quality.

The EPA is committed to better understanding community concerns around air quality. It is acting to improve access to information on air quality and communicating the actions it is taking to identify sources of air pollution and reduce emissions from those sources.

The EPA is using the report's findings and recommendations to inform and build on its current and ongoing activities as it engages with the Lower Hunter community on air quality issues. The study's findings also provide a model to assist the EPA to communicate other important environmental initiatives being implemented across NSW.

### **2. Recommendations**

The Lower Hunter Air Quality Community Research Project makes four recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: Grow community relationships.
- Recommendation 2: Work with industry and communities to address key community concerns.
- Recommendation 3: Develop a whole-of-community, targeted approach to participation, awareness raising and education.
- Recommendation 4: Develop a whole-of-community communication approach.

### **3. EPA response to the project's findings and recommendations**

The EPA commissioned the study in order to reach out to the broader Lower Hunter community and to ensure that those voices not usually heard would have a platform for expressing their views, knowledge and understanding of air quality issues. This study achieved that objective.

The EPA has reviewed the project's findings and four recommendations and is committed to making improvements that directly address the community's key concerns. While the report confirmed that there is more work to be done by the EPA, it is pleasing to note that the EPA's work is largely aligned with the focus of the recommendations and the EPA is already actively engaged in these areas.

Importantly, the EPA will continue its commitment to making improvements that directly address the community's key concerns.

#### **EPA commitment to community engagement**

The EPA particularly welcomes the study's finding that the community wants to work in partnership with government agencies, including the EPA, to protect the environment. The EPA will continue to work closely with key stakeholders, including the Newcastle Community Consultative Committee on the Environment and the Kooragang Island Industry Forum, to explore opportunities to implement the report's recommendations.

Other initiatives, such as the Upper Hunter Air Quality Monitoring Network Advisory Committee, the Rutherford Air Quality Liaison Committee and the Newcastle Community Consultative Committee on the Environment, all currently include community representation. This further reinforces the EPA's commitment to community engagement and involvement.

The EPA will involve and consult with the community in developing air quality programs. This approach is evident in the Lower Hunter Dust Deposition Study and the Lower Hunter Particle Characterisation Study. Both projects involved the community from the outset and have ongoing community input.

#### **EPA initiatives to address air quality and the community's key concerns**

The EPA notes that the link between air quality and health was the predominant concern for the Lower Hunter community.

The EPA recognises the health impacts and community concerns associated with wood heater, diesel and shipping emissions in the Hunter and more widely. The EPA is addressing these in consultation and collaboration with industry, councils and communities.

Key actions include:

- The wood smoke reduction program, which over the 2013 and 2014 winters provided \$194,000 to Hunter councils for community education, local enforcement and support of cleaner heating options.
- Current EPA projects to investigate and implement emission control measures for non-road diesel equipment used at coal mines, diesel locomotives and shipping.
- Publication of the EPA's Diesel and Marine Emissions Management Strategy.

Since the EPA commissioned this research project, a number of new studies have begun and existing initiatives have been progressed which also address some of the findings and recommendations from the survey. These programs include:

- [Lower Hunter Particle Characterisation Study](#).
- The establishment of a [new Newcastle Local Air Quality Monitoring Network](#)
- [Dust Deposition Study](#).
- Comprehensive information continually uploaded to the [EPA website](#) to offer a range of information on air quality, emissions and their sources.
- Completion of a compliance audit of coal loading and unloading facilities to enforce improvements to reduce coal dust emissions.

The results of these projects and studies will be important in directing government regulatory actions and responses on air quality in the region. The results will also be of great value to the broader community and will provide detailed information on air quality issues based on strong scientific evidence. In turn, this will enable informed debate and decision making.

### **Community understanding of air quality and the EPA's role**

Sections of the community are unaware of the work being done by the EPA in relation to the management of air quality. The EPA is working to ensure the Lower Hunter community has a comprehensive picture of air quality through a range of projects and studies. We are focused on sharing this information in the most effective way and using a range of tools.

The EPA is using a variety of communication channels, including local media, Twitter and the [EPA Connect newsletter](#), to raise the community's awareness of its air quality activities and to deliver timely responses to issues.

Implementing effective stakeholder engagement activities is a part of the EPA's Strategic Plan 2014–17. It recognises the important role of the community in the success of the EPA and its work in improving environmental outcomes.

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