



EPA response to the 2016–17 stakeholder survey

1. Overview

The NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) commissioned Ipsos Australia in 2013 and again in 2016–17 to conduct an independent survey of the EPA's key stakeholders and members of the general public. The surveys' purpose was to encourage stakeholders to provide honest, frank and confidential feedback about the EPA and its management of environmental issues. The EPA will use this feedback as a basis for:

- informing its environmental management policies and practices and its ongoing stakeholder engagement activities
- improving services to its stakeholders and to the community in its roles as a leader, partner and protector regarding the community and the environment.

The EPA's objectives for the 2016–17 survey were to:

- track the EPA's progress in meeting stakeholder requirements since 2013
- identify emerging issues among stakeholders
- understand the expectations of NSW residents and stakeholders – especially regarding the EPA's role of protecting the community and the environment
- Identify better ways to engage with stakeholders
- Inform future communication and engagement strategies
- measure the EPA's performance against its Strategic Plan, and Premier's Priority 12 that relates to increasing customer satisfaction with key government services.

Understanding how the EPA's work is perceived by its stakeholders is important for:

- improving and prioritising environmental management practices
- establishing better stakeholder engagement activities
- fostering trust and confidence in the EPA's work
- strengthening valuable partnerships with the entities that work closely with the EPA.

The EPA welcomes the 2016–17 results

The survey findings of 2016–17 reflect the EPA's efforts to enhance stakeholder engagement since the 2013 survey. Stakeholders are more satisfied overall with the way the EPA engages and consults, due to:

- greater and more effective use of community consultative committees
- the timeliness of EPA communications
- improved interactions with the EPA's online engagement hubs and relationships with stakeholders, with face-to-face meetings being highly valued.

The EPA accepts, however, that it can always do more – especially when communicating with environment and community groups during investigations or while responding to environmental incidents.

The EPA welcomes all the findings outlined in the survey and is grateful to participants for their valuable time and contributions.

Changes in survey populations from 2013 to 2016–17

A concerted effort was made to increase the number and variety of the stakeholders surveyed in 2016–17. Additional sub-groups such as grantees, licensees and technical and scientific specialists were included, as well as peak environment bodies and community representatives.

Twice as many householders were surveyed and four times as many EPA stakeholders as in 2013.

The 2016-17 survey, carried out from November to December 2016, consisted of **three components**:

Component	Participants in 2016–17 survey	Comparison with 2013 survey
Component A General NSW population online survey	NSW residents over the age of 18, chosen to be a randomised sample	1,000 participants compared to 500 in 2013
Component B Targeted stakeholder survey	Representatives from community, environment groups, local government and industry who had been in contact with the EPA in the previous 12 months	575 stakeholders and broader range of subgroups compared to around 130 people limited to key groups in 2013
Component C Interviews and focus groups	30 in-depth interviews and two online focus group workshops with licensees and local government	Similar to 2013 but different stakeholder groups targeted

At times the differences between the sample populations have affected comparability between the two surveys, but the 2016–17 survey provides a sound baseline for future surveys, as well as providing a basis for better targeting engagement with particular stakeholder groups.

2. Summary of findings in 2016–17

The overall survey findings suggest that most stakeholders and members of the general population who are aware of the EPA believe it has many positive attributes. More people than before view the EPA as professional, quick to respond to issues and incidents, and an effective regulator. There is also greater satisfaction with the EPA's communication. However, the EPA acknowledges that it can do more to communicate its roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes to foster understanding and confidence in its work.

Some stakeholders have a perception that the EPA may be too rigid in its application of regulation, and more innovation would be welcomed.

General population survey findings

The latest survey reiterates previous findings from the general population (survey component A) that many people are aware of the EPA but are not familiar with the broad range of the EPA's responsibilities. The EPA is keen to better communicate what it does and how it does it to a wider audience, to build further knowledge, confidence and trust in its work.

Major outcomes

- Most people have heard of the EPA, (~85%), with about half knowing a little bit about the EPA and 10% a fair amount.

- Of those who know something about the EPA, many feel it is **professional, trustworthy, independent and an effective regulator**. However, fewer believe the EPA is innovative.
- Most identify the EPA as the main agency to contact about environmental incident management, environmental regulation of industry, hazardous materials and industrial chemicals, water pollution, air quality and odours, pesticides, coal seam gas, radiation and contaminated land.
- Where there are shared responsibilities, most people are more likely to contact local councils about waste management and recycling, littering, or illegal dumping; and NSW Police or Fire and Rescue about excessive noise.
- Around 40% of the general population are satisfied with environmental management in NSW.
- According to the general population, the highest priorities for environmental regulation are **water pollution, hazardous materials and industrial chemicals, contaminated land sites, and air quality, odours and dust**.
- The best-managed issues are perceived to be **waste management and recycling, water pollution, air quality and odours, environmental incident management and noise**; whereas coal seam gas and illegal dumping are seen as being the least well-managed issues.

Stakeholder survey findings

Overall, the stakeholder surveys (survey components B and C) demonstrate that the EPA has significantly improved its perceived performance, as well as its communications and the quality of engagement with stakeholders. While there is still scope for the EPA to further improve ways in which it consults, stakeholders appreciate the greater use of community consultative committees, and particularly value quality relationships and face-to-face interactions with EPA staff.

A range of performance issues identified in the 2013 survey are also perceived to have improved, including **responsiveness, timeliness, transparency**, and being an **effective regulator**. The issues most commonly raised about the EPA's performance in 2017 related to:

- inconsistency between regions regarding ways in which the EPA applies environmental regulations
- rigidity in applying regulations.

These surveys highlight the value of the close relationship between local government and the EPA, with local government being the main group that unreservedly views the EPA as acting in a partnership role. Satisfaction with EPA performance has risen significantly among local government respondents since the 2013 survey, and is higher than for other stakeholder groups.

The feedback from key stakeholders indicates a diverse range of opinions about the EPA's overall performance, which is to be expected given that the EPA's stakeholders often have competing priorities and views. Responses are generally positive and constructive.

Major outcomes

- **58% of stakeholders** are satisfied with the level of environment protection in NSW (not asked in 2013).
- **67%** are satisfied with the overall performance of the EPA (up significantly from 51% in 2013).
- **71%** are satisfied with interactions with the EPA (not asked in 2013).
- **77%** are satisfied with the EPA's communication methods (up from 69% in 2013).
- Satisfaction levels vary across the main stakeholder groups with industry and local government generally more satisfied than community and environment groups.

- Most stakeholders see the EPA as **professional, approachable, trustworthy and honest, technically proficient, and independent and unbiased**. However, significantly fewer see the EPA as innovative.
- Most stakeholders are happy with the EPA's communication methods, which typically include phone, email and face-to-face channels, but some would like the EPA to consult more proactively before changes are introduced.
- Regarding management of issues they engage with the EPA about, stakeholders are generally satisfied with **litter management, incident management, illegal dumping and the ways in which the EPA communicates with the community**.
- Native forestry remains the issue of greatest concern.

3. Ipsos recommendations 2016–17

Ipsos Australia has outlined six primary recommendations to address stakeholder feedback about the way the EPA communicates. These recommendations are based on the 2016–17 survey results, including four that are updates to relevant recommendations arising from the 2013 survey.

New recommendations that build on the work under way from the 2013 survey findings

1. Continue to clearly communicate the EPA's role to stakeholders and the community.
2. Continue to ensure consultation with stakeholders is meaningful.
3. Continue to communicate the EPA's approach to compliance.
4. Continue to communicate how the EPA ensures appropriate levels of staffing and access to expertise.

New recommendations based on distinct 2017 results

5. Progress the positioning of the EPA as partner, protector and leader in its communications.
6. Grow presence and raise profile using a variety of media and multiple communication channels.

Pre-existing standard operating requirements

Ipsos views three other recommendations arising from the 2013 research as still important and relevant to the EPA's work. These are areas in which the EPA is perceived in the current survey to have made significant improvements. The 2013 recommendations are standard operating requirements for the organisation, needed so the EPA can continue to meet expectations and maintain high standards.

These 2013 recommendations are:

1. Ensure that the EPA understands and manages stakeholder expectations around responsiveness and timeliness of responses to submissions and enquiries
2. Continue to be as transparent as possible in all transactions and communications with stakeholders
3. Continue to demonstrate how the EPA balances competing stakeholder priorities and evidence in the compliance process.

4. EPA response to the survey findings and recommendations

The results of the 2016–17 survey show:

- **significant improvements and progress in stakeholder engagement** since 2013
- the **EPA is heading in the right direction**
- there is **scope for further improvement**.

The EPA has reviewed the Ipsos recommendations, and is committed to:

- addressing stakeholder feedback and improving performance
- incorporating ongoing work on recommendations from the 2013 survey into ongoing planning
- improving the timeliness and responsiveness of communications, particularly during significant or emergency incidents
- seeking opportunities to better inform, consult and involve all interested stakeholders.

When the EPA engages well with stakeholders, everyone works more effectively to protect the environment.

EPA achievements to date

Since the 2013 survey, the EPA has delivered:

- *Engaging with the Environment Protection Authority*, a guide for stakeholders and the public released in June 2015
- consultation pages on the EPA website to seek community views on changes to regulation and legislation
- integration with the NSW Government's 'Have Your Say' site to link back to EPA consultation pages
- community news pages for Williamstown and Botany residents containing issue-specific information and acting as a 'hub' for communities to seek information
- community consultative committees on specific issues, where members distribute information to their communities through local channels
- expanded customer service training for Environment Line staff and regional office staff who interact regularly with stakeholders
- a quarterly newsletter – *EPA Connect* – distributed to over 4000 stakeholders and published on the EPA website
- an EPA LinkedIn page
- a growing presence and expanded content on the EPA's Twitter account – including media releases and alerts to the community
- a core statement and narrative to better and more consistently communicate the EPA's role to stakeholders and the community
- customer service improvement initiatives to address the Premier's Priority 12, such as better access to conduct licencing transactions online.

Reaching the NSW community

Following the 2016–2017 survey, a key focus for the EPA will be to build awareness of our role across the general population by:

- redesigning and rewriting the EPA website, making it easier to find information and help
- redesigning and updating the quarterly *EPA Connect* newsletter communicating the EPA role as a leader, partner and protector widely and across all channels, to support its interactions with the community and clearly promote its roles and responsibilities

- enhancing and growing its Twitter and LinkedIn presence by diversifying content
- creating a consistent visual and readable style across communications material.

Stakeholder engagement

The EPA will also focus on increasing opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to issues by:

- enhancing the consultation pages on the EPA website by investigating the use of tools such as live chats, webinars and daily polls
- surveying *EPA Connect* newsletter subscribers to gather feedback on what they would like to hear about and how material can be improved, and then implementing change
- seeking opportunities to directly engage with key stakeholders on key issues
- reviewing community consultative committees to ensure communities are being kept informed.

This year, the EPA established a dedicated Stakeholder Engagement Unit to build consistent and genuine engagement by increasing capacity and capability across the organisation. The unit comprises a team of 9 staff located across the state from Sydney to Broken Hill, who understand stakeholder needs and commit to continuous improvement. Their work is being directly informed by the 2016–2017 survey findings.

The EPA will also continue to roll out training, support and development opportunities to staff to improve engagement capability and customer service. Some initiatives include:

- trialling and developing an electronic stakeholder management system to improve stakeholder data retention and better understand interactions
- developing engagement toolkits for EPA offices
- training staff on understanding their local stakeholder community and the EPA's roles as leader, partner and protector in the activities the EPA undertakes.

Implementing effective stakeholder engagement activities is a key result area of the EPA's Strategic Plan 2017–2021 and recognises the important role stakeholders play in the success of the EPA and its work in improving environmental outcomes.

The EPA is committed to being a world class regulator and an exemplar organisation. The 2016–2017 survey and the EPA's response to the findings are fundamental to achieving these goals.

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