

## **President's report to the NELA Annual General Meeting 2014**

Dear members

The past two years have been transformative for NELA.

We've strengthened our governance and developed a better understanding of our value proposition for members. We've introduced new information services, prepared policy and law reform submissions and supported new events and partnerships.

I'm pleased to report that 2013-14 is the year that NELA reversed a long term decline in membership. Our membership numbers and income remained steady this year for the first time in 10 years.

We didn't meet the board's goal of increasing membership by 20 per cent by June 2014 due to some delays with logistics for new initiatives, but we have every confidence the goal will be met next year.

### **NELA board**

We've had a wonderful energetic board of directors who've worked with our association services provider, Professional Association Management Services (PAMS) to enhance just about every aspect of NELA's operations.

The NELA directors are a strong team of dedicated and talented people. We met by teleconference about 10 times during the year and once face to face in February for our annual strategic planning session. We also met as sub committees on Membership Development, Publications and as the Oceans policy team, which is made up of about six NELA members and chaired by Sarah Waddell.

Sarah resigned as a director in September 2014 due to work commitments that mean she is outside Australia most of the time. Fortunately for NELA, Sarah will continue to lead NELA's policy project on integrated oceans planning.

Kathryn Walker from SA and Annaleen Harris from WA resigned as directors earlier this year due to other commitments. I thank both of them for their contribution as directors and particularly to Annaleen for her work in redeveloping the NELA website during 2013. We welcomed Wildaliz de Jesus as a new director who was co-opted from WA in June 2014.

### **Revising the constitution**

After more than 20 years NELA has changed and so now its constitution will be modernised to provide the flexibility for state divisions to form when there is a level of interest, but not to require them. With a modern constitution NELA directors will be better able to be accountable and transparent in the way they govern.

### **Policy activities**

NELA continued to be active on its three priority policy areas during the year – Oceans policy, maintaining strong national standards for assessment and approvals under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act*, and regulations to reduce Australia's greenhouse gas emissions.

I presented NELA's views on these issues when I led a NELA delegation to meet with Environment Minister Greg Hunt MP in January 2014. I was joined by long standing NELA members Elisa de Wit, Partner Norton Rose Fulbright and Tim Power, Partner, Herbert Smith Freehills.

We were very pleased to congratulate The Hon Rob Stokes MP, a long standing NELA member, on his appointment as NSW Minister for the Environment, Minister for Heritage, Minister for the Central Coast, and Assistant Minister for Planning. We look forward to hearing the Minister's opening address to the NELA national conference this year.

NELA provided many submissions during the year on topics ranging from Environmental Offsets policies to the Emissions Reduction Fund and urban water reform. They are available on the NELA website or on the website of the relevant Parliamentary Inquiry.

While NELA's directors were active in preparing many of the submissions I'm also grateful to our senior members with expertise in regulations on carbon markets and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and on environment protection and biodiversity laws for preparing many of our submissions.

Thanks to those who prepared and assisted with our submissions during the year, particularly:

- Sarah Waddell, consultant and NELA director
- Elisa de Wit, Norton Rose Fulbright, Melbourne
- Damien Lockie, Victorian Bar
- Bill McCredie and Juliane Bull, Allens Linklaters, Brisbane
- Professor Jan McDonald, UTAS and NELA director
- Jessica Feehely, EDO Tasmania and NELA director
- Amanda Cornwall, NELA director

### **Events and competitions**

With success of the national conference in 2013 NELA board decided to hold a national conference annually. After initial plans looked financially unsustainable I started looking for an alternative business model to deliver a conference with minimal financial risk and logistical burden. Fortunately Legalwise Events expressed interest in working with us to present a one day conference. This year it's in Sydney on 21 November and the program is as impressive as ever. I'm optimistic it will become a regular event in the environmental law calendar. If you haven't registered yet do so now.

The WA division have continued to present well attended seminars during the year and an annual WA NELA conference, this time reduced to a half-day event on 16 October 2014.

We're also very proud to be partnering with the University of Tasmania's inaugural Environmental Law Research Symposium in February 2015, a great new event for environment and climate change law academics led by Professor Jan McDonald.

Thanks to Brendan Grigg for his fine work in managing and promoting NELA's national essay competition to academics and students across Australia. He and Jan have injected new enthusiasm into this important flagship for NELA's relationship with universities.

### **Information services**

In August we launched the exciting new NELA flagship publication the National Environmental Law Digest and the associated online Resources Library. The quarterly Digest is distributed for free through our partner organisations and member firms, and the Library is available on our website.

It's a clever idea of pooling the articles prepared by our member law firms for their clients, adding a few articles by invited authors and then distributing them all widely. Lawyers get to read what their colleagues are saying and others get comprehensive, high quality legal updates for free.

I've been keen to get this project off the ground for a few years so I was pleased to see it happen. It's ambitious for NELA as it relies almost entirely on the volunteer editors.

Digest Editor Jess Feehely has shown great leadership in bringing the project together. It's still a work in progress and we look forward to developing the number of contributing firms and broadening the distribution base in coming years.

NELA Bulletin editor Ellen Geraghty has done an outstanding job of delivering the Bulletin to us all each month. This year we made further improvements by recruiting two deputy editors to share the work load and ensure there's some transition planning, as Ellen won't want to do this volunteer gig forever.

We also maintained the website as a resource with publications and submissions. Thanks to Sarah Waddell who was our webmaster until August 2014.

### **Partnerships and affiliations**

Building partnerships has been a major theme for my Presidency between 2012 and 2014. For the 2013 national conference we partnered with Melbourne Law School, The Climate Group and the Legal Practice Section of the Law Council of Australia to provide publicity for the conference and help build the program. We also entered a successful arrangement with Thomson Reuters to publish the conference papers as a special edition of the Environment and Planning Law Journal.

In 2013 NELA entered new affiliations with Sustainable Business Australia and Australian Legal Sector Alliance and we further developed our arrangements with Victorian Planning and Environment Law Association. Since the launch of the National Environmental Law Digest in August 2014 we've also been regularly cross promoting events with Queensland Environment Law Association for the first time in many years. We're also consolidating our relationship with the Australian Committee of the IUCN and the Law Council of Australia.

### **Thanks and farewell**

It's been a demanding couple of years for me as President of NELA driving so much change and taking a few risks along the way. But I've enjoyed the chance to lead an organisation that has a vital role to play in protecting our environment and promoting public understanding of environmental law. I look forward to seeing where it goes next.

Amanda Cornwall  
President  
23 September 2014