

Altona environment improvement plan (EIP)



Altona Complex Neighbourhood Consultative Group (ACNCG) in session

Project summary

Date

Late 1988 – ongoing

Stakeholders

- EPA.
- Companies operating in the Altona Chemical Complex: BASF Australia, Dow Chemical (Australia) and Qenos.
- Hobsons Bay City Council, Victorian Workcover Authority (VWA).
- Local residents in Altona and neighbouring suburbs.

Resources

- **Money and time:** EPA representation at meetings (three or more times a year) plus time for preparation, briefings etc.

Engagement and tools used

- **Inform:** *Consultative Chronicle* newsletter.
- **Consult:** ACNCG meetings, Environmental Action Line (phone hotline).
- **Involve:** Complex site visits, environmental monitoring teams.
- **Collaborate:** EIP development.
- **Empower:** Establishment of independent body – ACNCG.

Key contacts

- Tim Faragher, West Metropolitan Regional Services.

Chemical fix

In 1984, the chemical industry was under intense global scrutiny. The largest chemical manufacturing industrial complex in the southern hemisphere was located in Altona. The complex had a number of serious releases and incidents prompting significant community concern and outrage.

Widespread anger and frustration was brewing amongst the residents of Altona and they felt there was no opportunity for their voices to be heard. Large public meetings were convened and decisions were made to oppose development proposals by the industry. Street marches, placards and petitions were also organised and pressure for the complex to close its operations mounted.

EPA, as the regulator, was also suffering backlash from the community, who wanted serious sanctions placed on the industry in response to concerns. The environment improvement plan (EIP) was a relatively new concept for EPA and its introduction into this particular situation was seen as a way to bring the stakeholders together to come to a successful resolution.

What was EPA's role?

What success meant to us

EPA foresaw that it was possible for some improvement of all stakeholders' situations:

- Community must be given the opportunity to voice its concerns and have those concerns responded to, openly and transparently.

- Industry could work to improve its operations and therefore gain greater acceptance of its operations and environmental impact and thus provide more certainty for its future.
- EPA would gain leverage from cooperation between the community and industry for the improvement of the environment.

What did we do?

We arranged a number of public meetings, attended by managing directors from the chemical complex, community representatives, EPA staff, other government agencies and Hobsons Bay City Council representatives.

These meetings led to the adoption of EIPs by the Altona Chemical Complex, which ensured that companies continued to strive for improved environmental performance. EIPs for each company were developed in conjunction with EPA, councils and the community, making certain that all relevant stakeholders were consulted. Additionally, all seven companies which made up the Altona Chemical Complex at the time entered into a voluntary agreement under which they committed to reducing emissions by 50 per cent over five years.

The Altona Complex Neighbourhood Consultative Group (ACNCG) was formed and became the administrative centre for the purpose of facilitating discussions between industry, EPA and the community. The ACNCG consisted of senior managers from the seven sites in the complex, EPA managers, community members and council officers.



The consultative group remains functional today and has spearheaded many initiatives, including:

- The *Consultative Chronicle* newsletter, which is printed three times a year and delivered to around 10,000 households, businesses and complex employees in the Altona area. It is ACNCG's principal method of communication with the wider community.
- An Environmental Action Line was set up to provide an immediate response to residents who wanted to report any issues concerning them. This is a 24-hour hotline that is answered by staff within the complex and gives the community the opportunity to deal directly with industry without relaying pollution reports through EPA.
- Complex site visits can be organised by residents and allow them to better understand the processes within the area and learn to recognise some of the odours produced from the site. Consequently, in the case of errant odours, the residents can help identify the problem and obtain a more efficient correction of the problem or offensive odour.
- A telephone network has been established that is connected to local schools, kindergartens, Hobsons Bay City Council and Westgate Migrant Resource Centre. It is designed to notify these places promptly in case of an emergency. A community alarm is also in place in case the wider area needs to be alerted.
- Environmental monitoring teams (EMTs) were created to help formulate and monitor each company's EIP. The teams include the relevant company, EPA, other Government authorities, local council and community residents.

What were the results?

- The Altona Chemical Complex has achieved significant improvements in its environmental performance.
- EPA helped develop and continues to be involved in a self-sustaining system for community engagement, the ACNCG.

What did we learn?

- **Community engagement matters.** The Altona Chemical Complex situation accelerated EPA's resolve to work with the community in order to find solutions.
- **Relinquish some control.** EPA was traditionally 'the regulator' who directed problem resolution from an expert position. It was found in this case that partnering with the community led to much more constructive and long-term solutions and the realisation that there is more than one way to solve problems of this nature.
- **Credibility is paramount.** Consistent attendance at meetings, acknowledging mistakes, being prepared to listen and compromise when necessary and always being open and transparent, all contribute to trust and respect within the community.
- **Consider all community input.** Even seemingly insignificant problems can be of great importance and, if not approached with respect and consideration, can delay proceedings.