

## NGO Statement in response to NETS – PACE materials review

### Independent review finds bias, inaccuracy in Government materials on nanotechnology

Over a number of years NGOs have consistently raised concerns regarding the bias and inaccuracy of Australian Federal Government materials regarding new technologies and their failure to adequately consider ethical and social issues. A Government commissioned independent review of materials produced or funded by the Government's National Enabling Technology Strategy– Public Awareness and Engagement section (NETS-PACE) has upheld these concerns and raised serious questions regarding the role of the Government in societal debates regarding new technologies.

The review found that:

- The purpose and objectives of many of the materials and events was unclear i.e. there was confusion between materials and activities designed to promote engagement and those designed to promote enthusiasm for new technologies.
- Many of the materials reviewed contained content that was biased and/ or inaccurate.
- Inadequate attention was given to environmental and health and safety risks and social issues.

The materials reviewed represented the full spectrum of materials produced or funded by the department, including CSIRO teacher information, TechNYou<sup>1</sup> materials and Government information materials. The review found that Government materials were largely geared towards promotional rather than education and outreach objectives. The review also found a number of instances of bias and inaccuracy in public awareness and education materials on nanotechnology which were produced or funded by the Government.

Materials found to be unbalanced included:

- **An Avant Card booklet – Does Size Matter?**  
This made scant reference to any of the potential risks associated with nanotechnology and implied that the Government and scientists “are addressing these problems” – despite nanomaterials in Australia being effectively unregulated. The reviewers noted that the booklet “read as a marketing communication text and has a tone of promotion and reassurance”<sup>2</sup> despite its purpose ostensibly being to provide “basic information about nanotechnology including risk and regulations”.<sup>3</sup>
- **The ‘space elevator’ and ‘personal care products’ modules for high school teaching from the Access Nano Program (2009)**  
The ‘space elevator’ module describes carbon nanotubes, yet makes no reference to potential risks – despite carbon nanotubes being suspected carcinogens.<sup>4</sup>
- **A Nanotechnology and foods factsheet 2009**  
This frames possible dangers associated with nanotechnology in food as “interesting experimental questions, rather than matters of real concern to some”.<sup>5</sup>
- **A “new technologies for a changing climate” brochure (2010)**  
The reviewers found that “each of the mini science project profiles is upbeat and none make reference to possible adverse effects, expressing none of the concerns about possible negative effects until the penultimate page where it talks about the need for ‘stringent testing and due diligence’”.<sup>6</sup> The reviewers observed that the booklet positions biotech and nanotech as “cutting edge” solutions for climate change without reflecting wider developments in sustainability. There is one mention of health safety and environment issues on p.14 which again relegates these matters to Government

agencies for “stringent testing”. According to the reviewers “this item reads as a biotech and nanotech promotional publication and as such would not be seen as a neutral item suitable as an input to a formal public engagement process.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Independent review raises concerns regarding public engagement processes**

The review raised concerns about a number of the public engagement processes conducted by the department observing that “these events were aimed primarily at anticipating and managing stakeholder responses rather than dialogue.” The reviewers asked “were these events held to provide wide ranging information and to create debate and genuine dialogue on nanotechnology – or to highlight successful and appealing applications that would serve as ‘pin up posters’ for generating public interest and acceptance of nanotech?”<sup>8</sup>

While the review acknowledged that public engagement processes had improved more recently, serious concerns remain about the quality of materials underpinning public engagement. The review noted that “because information/awareness materials ‘set the scene’ for stakeholder engagement strategies, it is important that neutral information is used throughout the entire program to create a clear message for audiences and participants.”<sup>9</sup>

The review also raised concerns about the disconnect between public engagement processes and policy formulation. The reviewers note that “internationally, the trend is not only towards two way communication but also towards upstream public engagement to ensure more effective opportunities for stakeholder input to policy goals and investment priorities, and to support participatory and anticipatory technology assessment.”<sup>10</sup>

The review states that “engagement processes need to take place prior or at the same time as policies are determined, rather than after policies have been put in place. This requires a willingness by the policy-makers to listen to views emerging from public consultations and to demonstrate how stakeholder input has been included.”<sup>11</sup> The reviewers argue that “raising expectations about inclusion when foundational decisions have already been made may actually add to social distrust, resulting in a perverse outcome. This diminishes the potential to create the ‘positive culture’ between stakeholders that is being sought.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Action required to ensure Government materials and public engagement meet community expectations**

Government materials regarding new technologies must provide accurate information about the state and coverage of regulation. Information must also be balanced. That is, rather than promoting only the scientific and commercial opportunities associated with new technologies, their risks, uncertainties and social impacts should be fully acknowledged to ensure that the public can engage in informed debate.

We the undersigned organisations therefore call on the Government to implement in full the recommendations of the independent review and ensure that:

#### **1) Materials produced or funded by Government:**

- Contain accurate information, are balanced and value neutral, and recognise the uncertainties and potential risks of emerging technologies;
- Acknowledge regulatory gaps where they exist;
- Consider the societal dimensions of new technologies such as questions of ethics, privacy, intellectual property, ownership, human rights and values;

- Be reviewed by a multi-stakeholder sub-committee;
- Are withdrawn and reviewed of if they do not meet the above criteria.

## 2) Public engagement processes:

- take place upstream of policy development to ensure more effective opportunities for stakeholder input to policy goals and investment priorities.
- support participatory and anticipatory technology assessment.

## Background to the review

On 30th April 2010 the Federal Government's National Enabling Technology Strategy– Public Awareness and Engagement section (NETS-PACE) hosted a workshop attended by representatives from 12 NGOs and community organisations. At the meeting the participants raised serious concerns regarding the pro-industry bias and inaccuracy in Government backed materials regarding new technologies, including those produced by TechNYou. The meeting requested a critical review of NETS – PACE materials for bias and inaccuracy, including information, education resources, and public opinion surveys.

In response, NETS referred the request to its yet to be formed Ministerial Stakeholder Advisory Council (SAC). SAC considered the matter in January 2011 and recommended a review by an independent panel which was then commissioned by DIIRSTE. The review was completed in 2012 and the review report referred to a SAC multi-stakeholder sub-committee to make recommendations.

## Endorsing organisations

- Consumer Federation of Australia
- GeneEthics
- National Toxics Network
- SEARCH Foundation
- MADGE
- The Australia Institute
- Friends of the Earth

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<sup>1</sup> An information and outreach service established by DIIRSTE (now the Department of Industry).

<sup>2</sup> Gascoigne, T. & Cronin, K. (2012) Appendix A: 5B Nanotechnology Avant Card 'Does size really matter?', Independent Review of the Australian Government 'National Enabling Technologies Strategy' (NETS) Public Awareness Community Engagement Programme (PACE), <http://www.innovation.gov.au/industry/nanotechnology/PublicAwarenessandEngagement/Documents/ReviewPanelFinalReport.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Biotext, (2012) Attachment A – materials and activities reviewed, *Review of the Australian Government 'National Enabling Technologies Strategy' (NETS) Public Awareness Community Engagement program (PACE)*, <http://www.innovation.gov.au/industry/nanotechnology/PublicAwarenessandEngagement/Documents/ReviewSummary.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Safe Work Australia (2012) Classification of Carbon Nanotubes as Hazardous Chemicals, [http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/SWA/about/Publications/Documents/726/Classification\\_of\\_Carbon\\_Nanotubes\\_as\\_Hazardous\\_Chemicals.pdf](http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/SWA/about/Publications/Documents/726/Classification_of_Carbon_Nanotubes_as_Hazardous_Chemicals.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Gascoigne, T. & Cronin, K. (2012) Appendix A: 3C. Nanotechnology and foods factsheet (2009)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix A: 6C. "New technologies for a changing climate" brochure (2010)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix A: 4A Nanodialogues – engaging with the unengaged.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 3.1 General comments

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 3.3. Discussion of findings.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix A: 5A 2008 Social Inclusion and Community Engagement Workshop