

Members' Perspective

How Sustainable is Our Industry & Profession and for That Matter

How Sustainable Are You in This Industry?

Our Industry is relatively young; compare us against established markets and professions that use our services. Building & Construction has been with us from prehistoric times, the Legal Industry has been with us ever since humans started to argue – that was a fair while ago...

How long have we been caring for the Environment? – that probably extends back several centuries with the Human need to Farm to produce food and provide clean sanitation and drinking water.

How long have we been concerned about Chemical Contamination of our Environment?



I remember as a little kid growing up in the shadows of a manufacturing plant in the Western Suburbs in Melbourne and waking up in the middle of the night with my bedroom lit up as if it was day time due to flaring off activities. I used to think that was pretty cool as a little kid, as I grew up I wondered why that happened in the middle of the night and why did we never see that during the day – today that facility is a client.

You look back at moments in your life and wonder where your life direction comes from, it is certainly family and it is also the environment that we are brought up in.

My LinkedIn profile alerted me this month that I have been working for the last 5 years as the Managing Director for Eurofins Environmental laboratories in Australia, celebrating 5 years of that appointment.

What LinkedIn didn't alert me to was that I was also celebrating 35 years as of 10th January 2018 of working in the Environmental Monitoring Industry.

I started work at the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) at the bright age of 17 years and 11 months after finishing my HSC and getting a Traineeship with the MMBW. I started working in the Trade Waste Group setting up Trade Waste Agreements to allow Industry to discharge its Trade Waste effluents to Melbourne's Sewerage system. We also worked with a team of Trade Waste Inspectors that had the job of sampling the effluent prior to discharge and sending those samples to the MMBW Laboratory for analysis.

We would receive the results from the lab, compare them against the Trade Waste By-Law Limits of acceptance and if any results exceeded the limits we would contact the company and set up a meeting to discuss their non-compliance after issuing them with a very formal Non-Compliance Letter, of course written and hand typed by the Letter writing Department of the MMBW. That letter may take a week or so to get back to us from the Letter writing Department we would then send it through the postal room which would send the letter by post and the company would receive their formal notice that they have an issue around 4-6 weeks after the Inspector took the initial sample.

After a negotiation process that may then take another month or so for the company to hopefully rectify the issue, 6-10 weeks after the Inspector took the initial sample.

You have to remember that computers, let alone I.T. did not exist. A Typewriter was very modern and someone like me did not have the faintest idea of how it worked.

In those days the office was full of smokers the air was thick and lunch time involved a trip to the Pub for several Pots and a Pie – many will understand where my liking for such things has come from....

The Environmental Monitoring Industry at that time was virtually unheard of, certainly remediation was not, it wasn't needed. We didn't know at the time that Industry itself, by its activities, was creating the Contaminated land Industry that we know today.

Environmental monitoring was conducted on sewage effluents and Drinking Water but it was well before any contaminated land Industry existed. My family and friends didn't understand what I did, I would try to explain and they would say "yeah mate, get a real job".

So how does this work into the theme of this issue of ALGA's Cronicle on Sustainability – I am asking how Sustainable is our Industry and how Sustainable are you at being able to work in it long term, can you survive 35 years?

If you are a Graduate Environmental Scientist first year out of University working in a shiny bright open plan Consultancy Office at the top end of town, nothing wrong with that. How do you see our Industry in 35 years' time and how do you see yourself in your late 50's working in our Industry, what will the issues be?

I remember accompanying some Trade Waste Inspectors 30 years ago, they were always ex Plumbers with crook backs to a few companies that were recalcitrant against their Non Compliance and continued discharging effluent with elevated metals or cyanide and the

Inspectors job was to pour concrete down the Boundary Trap connecting the company's sewage pipes to the MMBW Sewer. This action disconnected them from the sewer stopping all operations and plugging all discharges from the site including toilets, closing them down.

In those days this was a serious action and I remember a directive from the State Government that they wanted to lift the awareness of the Environment so they wanted to give Regulators like EPA and MMBW some teeth really on the back of Green Peace actions to physically seal off the Nufarm Factory from the sewer due to Dioxin concerns that they raised – previously unknown.

Entrepreneurs are important to advance any Industry to make it Sustainable and people taking risks are important for advancements. I remember leaving the MMBW and joining mgt when there was only 10 employees. One of those employees knew how to work a typewriter, no computers and a couple of basic GC's and an AA and reports were sent out by mail, hand written Prelims were sent by Fax, very modern.

mgt is a good example of such entrepreneurs it started at a time when private Environmental Laboratories were not in the market place, there was no need, all analysis was conducted by the MMBW or EPA Labs. The changes to the EPA Act including the need for Industry to Self-Monitor its emissions to the Environment and be responsible under Licencing created the opportunity.

mgt was not alone it was the same foundation that created ALS, NAL & ESP – later other labs also started up such as LabMark and Envirolab. All took risks on the back of opportunity. There have of course been others that took the step unsuccessfully; risk has its downfalls.

The same can be said about Consultancies where certain individuals have seized the opportunities to successfully start up new Consultancies – examples are JBS&G, Prensa and Senversa. Again many have also tried and failed doing the same thing, so be aware, don't read this a proclamation to take risks, it is really hard. Failure is not part of Sustainability and it hurts when it fails.

I crossed over to Management around 15 years ago and now have responsibility across all aspects of Eurofins Environmental Laboratory operations in Australia and New Zealand.

These days I am amazed with the technology that is available to us to look lower and to identify new and emerging contaminants across any aspect of the Environment.

35 years ago whilst working with the MMBW I jumped out of bed every morning, I enjoyed the work and that enjoyment has continued throughout my 35 years working in this Industry. Still to this day I am doing the same, getting out of bed and looking forward to the days challenges.

So I have been relatively Sustainable within this Industry along with many others that have built successful Careers and companies.

So is the Contaminated land Industry a sustainable market that will be here in another 100 years' time?

I remember speaking with Consultants 20 odd years ago asking "when will this TPH thing die down, surely we will clean up all TPH issues in the next few years". TPH morphed to TRH, it is still our highest frequency test in the Laboratory, still an issue that looks like going nowhere.

I remember speaking with Asbestos people at the same time asking them the same question, "surely we will clean all the Asbestos up as it is banned and not allowed in the country and that would surely



only take the next couple of years to clean it all up". That hasn't happened, nor does it look like it.

We are still looking at PAH, Metals, Ammonia, Cyanide and all the other routine well established contaminants that we were looking at 30 years ago. As a Lab we are using better techniques that look at lower LOR's and creating better data through improved Instrumentation, automation and Laboratory and Quality practices. As an Industry we are using that data wiser and not reactively with concrete pours and dig and dump mentalities.

So Emerging contaminants are the new thing on the block, led of course by the PFAS Giant that is spreading throughout the industry. Do we ask ourselves the same questions about PFAS that I asked those years ago about TPH & Asbestos. The answer for me is in those same contaminants of concern, once people and the community are concerned about a contaminant, that concern won't go away. What our Industry needs to do is alleviate or minimise those concerns so as the community feels relatively safe living with those contaminants and understanding the risks.

PFAS is not the sole trader in Emerging Contaminants and others will show their heads probably faster than we realise. With the advancements that are happening in analytical chemistry that now look where we have not looked before and at levels that we have not looked before. How we as an industry grows to handle those new arrivals and to importantly reduce community concerns around the issues of those new compounds will certainly make our Industry Sustainable well into the future.

How Sustainable you will be within this industry? – well that is only answerable by you, all I can say is enjoy the challenges and take the opportunities on board and create answers that will make this Industry grow into the future – as it should.

And enjoy getting out of bed in the morning. ■



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