ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Improving Access to Victorian Public Sector Information and Data

Melbourne — 8 September 2008

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Dr L. Minty, Assistant Director, Water Analysis and Reporting, Water Division, Bureau of Meteorology.

Mr CRISP — This is the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee, and I welcome Dr Louise Minty. My colleagues are away on other parliamentary business so I have been empowered to take evidence today. The committee is an all-party parliamentary committee and is hearing evidence on the Inquiry into Improving Access to Victorian Public Sector Information and Data. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege. Any comments you may make outside the hearing are not afforded such privilege. Could you please state your full name and professional address, and whether you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation.

Dr MINTY — My name is Louise Minty. I am with the Bureau of Meteorology. I work in the new water division as an assistant director, and I am here today representing that organisation.

Mr CRISP — Thank you, Louise. Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. I invite you to make a verbal submission and then we will have time for questions at the end.

Dr MINTY — That is fine, thank you.

Mr CRISP — Of all of the government departments at the moment you have the sharp end of a lot of interest. I am a country member.

Dr MINTY — There you go. I would like to draw your attention to a couple of points in the submission we have put to you. I will be looking at the meteorological as well as the water end of our responsibilities, but I will run through the key points of the submission just to orientate myself as well as the committee. I formally thank the committee for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Bureau of Meteorology. As the national weather climate and water agency the Bureau has relevant experience in the provision of public sector information to the Australian community, and the Bureau provides a wide range of meteorological and related services in the public interest generally, and for the specific benefit of major community and industry sectors. Most of that is under the authority of the Meteorology Act 1955.

I draw your attention to the fact that we are now celebrating 100 years of operation. As you pointed out, that range of services has expanded recently to include the provision of water information services under the authority of the commonwealth Water Act of 2007. The Bureau provides these services for an extensive range of federal, state and local government departments and agencies, including those associated with emergency management, water, fire, aviation and marine safety, agriculture, climate change, defence and foreign affairs. Fundamental to the provision of these national meteorological services is a high level of international cooperation. That is for three reasons: the atmosphere is interactive on a global space; the expense and impracticality of each nation establishing its own data-gathering networks across the globe; and the necessity for a high degree of standardisation and timely delivery of data to enable the integration of that data into weather analyses and predictions.

The international cooperation is enabled by the World Meteorological Organisation which is a specialised agency of the UN. It provides the policy framework for the exchange of information on the state of the atmosphere, oceans and inland waters and for the dissemination of meteorological services in all of its 185-member nations as well for international shipping and aviation. Across the world public access to reliable information on past, present and future weather and climate is viewed as a fundamental responsibility of government, but the policies on the appropriateness of charging for this access vary. The US has what is regarded as the most open policy, and the Europeans are probably at the other end where they favour the cost-recovery mode. The Australian Bureau of Meteorology delivers its services in accordance with the Australian Government's guidelines for cost recovery in commonwealth agencies, and this allows for the provision of a basic service free of charge, or for cost of access as well as the provision of user-specific services on a cost-recovery basis; it is a two-tier system.

Even where public access across the globe is provided free of charge governments tend to impose some sort of restriction on the use of that information mostly through the exercise of copyright. For example, all of the information on the Bureau's website comes with a statement of copyright linked to our copyright notice. Currently we are reviewing our licensing arrangements and considering the applications of open contact licensing models, so that is very timely for us, and Creative Commons is one of those licensing models we are looking at. Such a model allows us to retain some rights to the data and information products while maximising the benefits of open access. I am sure you are aware of it, but in particular the Bureau is actively seeking the support of state and territory governments at the moment for the use of this Creative Commons licensing framework to publish the water data that it is collecting from state and territory water data custodians. That data is being collected through a set of water regulations under the commonwealth Water Act.

In terms of the delivery of data and information services, the Bureau makes extensive use of the mass media for its weather forecasting services and the internet for all of its other data and products. In our experience these particular media are the most efficient and cost-effective to hand. Who knows what the future will hold, but at the moment they are the most cost-effective and efficient, such that the Bureau plans the development of a Web-enabled Australian water resources information system in the future. Work is under way now and this will greatly expand the accessibility of water information nationally and improve the useability of the meteorological information that we currently publish through the Bureau's website. They are our main delivery mechanisms.

Lastly, I just want to draw your attention to the point that was being made earlier, which was that the critical elements in making all of the data and information useable and engendering confidence in that information is the use of commonly agreed standards for collection, dissemination and transfer, and metadata frameworks; that is where you end up. I think that is all I want to draw your attention to.

Mr CRISP — You alluded a little to this too, but we are looking at those fundamental principles that an effective government information management framework is based on. Has the Bureau got to defining those principles for the Bureau itself? Are you looking within the bureau to define those or are you looking for guidance from outside?

Dr MINTY — I would say yes and no. For the meteorological data, I suppose a lot of that is being defined by the international community and our part in the World Meteorological Organisation. For the water information, I suppose that is still to do, and combining the two together is an activity of the Bureau of Meteorology, so we are in the midst of trying to determine on an appropriate set of data policy frameworks internally that are consistent with the external world.

Mr CRISP — In cost recovery, within the Bureau which way is the argument running? There is a balance. There is a basic free-of-charge. BOM is on my favourites, and at a stressful moment one looks at the weather to see what is going to happen. Which way do you think Australia is going? You tend to talk about making it more nationally available, which is that water data. Is that the trend throughout the organisation?

Dr MINTY — I would say that the intention with the water information is to make it all freely available and not to impose any particular cost recovery regime. There is none proposed, but we still sit within the guidelines within which the organisation operates, and they are the commonwealth guidelines for cost recovery. So, again, it would still be that those basic principles are that there is a basic service yet to be defined for water, but we are hoping to make it as expansive as possible. Anything beyond that of a user-specific nature at this stage comes under the cost recovery regime or, at minimum, cost of access.

Mr CRISP — You spoke of Creative Commons as the one you are using, but you said you would consider others. Will the Bureau look at having a uniform system throughout? You talked about Creative Commons for water, but I was not sure what you meant — whether it was going across everything.

Dr MINTY — With respect to its weather and climate information, the Bureau has a range of, I suppose, licensing arrangements, as there are some user-access agreements for specific groups to access large chunks of information and just a copyright notice on others. As I said, with the water information we are looking to actually use the Creative Commons licensing framework. Yes, the intention is that there will be one framework under which all of the information that the organisation deals with will be licensed. In many ways the developments with respect to water information are leading the organisation into a new realm, but they are happy to move into a new realm as well.

Mr CRISP — At the interface between allowing the data out publicly and when someone is going to add value to that and charge for it, and at the point you charge those users, how are you going to go defining those boundaries?

Dr MINTY — At the moment we have a range of consultative mechanisms with the private sector in particular, because our greatest concern is really to make sure that they have a viable way of creating their businesses and that we support that and not compete with it, so we are also mindful of the competitive neutrality guidelines in that respect. We do that through a range of consultative mechanisms where we bring the private sector providers into discussion and we talk about what products the Bureau will provide and what then they can expect from us in terms of service levels and where their patch is from there on. It is actually a constantly shifting boundary, so we have to maintain that consultation on a regular basis. As technology changes, expectations change. That is our mechanism at the moment.

Mr CRISP — The other area we want to explore now is governance of access. In your submission you talk about low-level restrictions on access, with users having to register before gaining access, so I am interested to hear some more about how those governance structures are going to be employed by the bureau.

Dr MINTY — As I said, at the moment we have access agreements in place, so it is actually quite easy to determine who is getting access to certain types of information, but it is very difficult to determine who is getting access to or who is accessing other information that is freely available through the web. I would have to say the movement into a new regime is still to be done, but the licensing framework should facilitate that. The intention is really not to restrict but to know where weather information is going without restricting their access. I cannot tell you that we have got it worked out yet, but we know we have got to move from where we are now to something a bit more open. The Creative Commons framework, as well as being a licensing framework, allows you to do the tracking of who has actually taken up that licence. That will also put us into much better contact with the user community and allow us to follow up as necessary on how they are evaluating the data.

Mr CRISP — That is excellent. Is there anything more you want to add to where we have been?

Dr MINTY — Not really; I do not think so. We are pleased about the work of the committee going on.

Dr KOOPS — I could ask a couple of things: you said that under your current licensing arrangements you can identify who has got your licence data, whereas under Creative Commons, for example, it is a lot harder — as you mentioned — to track that data. I was wondering what use you make of the information you have about who has got your data. Is that any practical use to you, or is it just comforting?

Dr MINTY — I would say we probably do not make as much use of it as we should and what we intend to do is use it in the future. Mostly we need to keep track of, in particular, who has picked up sensitive products, like warnings. Those are the sorts of things you do not want altered or changed or modified in any way, so you want to know who those particular products are being disseminated to, and that when they do go forward, that they are in the same format. So, yes, it is more protecting the integrity of the product at this time, rather than understanding who the users are and what their needs are, but we are certainly trying to turn our focus around a little bit from there.

Dr KOOPS — But it does assist in ensuring that the integrity of the product is maintained?

Dr MINTY — Yes. Creative Commons will do that as well. It is a different level that says, 'Do not alter; do not change' et cetera. We can certainly still do that. In many ways it covers off on a lot of the bases and in a much simpler framework. I think you probably still need maybe a customer relationship module or something or other to connect with it, but that can be done.

Dr KOOPS — Part of the rationale for this inquiry, though, is that people out there might be able to take data and do things with it — data mash, or whatever — in order to make products that take it beyond where it is at the moment, whereas you are talking about maintaining the integrity of the data?

Dr MINTY — Only for some specific products; for others, no problem whatsoever. That is a very specific product. When we are just talking about, say, the dissemination of water data and water information, the mash-ups are fine. Others can do it, and we will probably be doing quite a bit of assisting in that sense by trying to give it a geographic framework and a way to actually orientate it spatially et cetera.

Dr KOOPS — You adhere to the cost recovery policy — —

Dr MINTY — Guidelines.

Dr KOOPS — Yes — 'guidelines' at the moment. I have heard a suggestion that has been put that the existence of a commercial relationship between the provider of information and the customer creates an incentive to maintain the quality of the data. This is an argument, say, to maintain a cost-recovery approach. Would you regard that as an important component for maintaining the quality of data put out by the Bureau of Meteorology?

Dr MINTY — It is hard to track that one through, isn't it? To be honest, we know what the quality of the data is when it leaves us. Except for specific products, as I mentioned — the warning products — I do not know that I particularly care whether the quality is maintained through and through unless there is a continual attribution and I suppose that is probably the main concern. Whether or not making people pay for it actually ensures that they maintain the integrity of it, I could not comment. It would be a personal view, anyway.

Dr KOOPS — Good.

Mr CRISP — Thank you very much, Doctor. There are a couple of things we need to go through at the end, but thank you very much for that. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. Typing errors may be corrected but not matters of substance, and again thank you for your attendance today and thank you very much for your information.

Dr MINTY — You are very welcome.

Witness withdrew.