Hon Gail Gago MLC
Minister for Environment and Conservation
Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Ministerial visit to

Germany, Sweden, Scotland,
Ireland and Italy

20 August 2007 – 2 September 2007
WASTE MANAGEMENT AND RECYCLING

South Australia’s Strategic Plan has a target of reducing waste to landfill by 25% by 2014. There has already been significant progress in the reduction of commercial and building waste going to landfill, as well as SA’s impressive household waste recycling record. There are already some companies in SA using household waste to produce fuel for industry. I am particularly interested in new and emerging technologies in this area that reduce reliance on fossil fuels and reuse waste that would normally go to landfill so that we can minimise our ecological footprint.

Herhof Recycling Plant

Herhof Technologies is acknowledged as a world leader in renewable energy and environmental technology. Its household waste recycling plant in Onsabruck, Germany, is considered the latest and most efficient producer of secondary fuel from waste. I visited this plant 22 August 2007 and met with the CEO and senior staff.

The Herhof plant receives all household waste from the City and District of Osnabruck which has a population of approximately 400,000. It processes 90,000 ton of household waste per annum. Annually his waste is converted into approximately:

- 45,000 ton Stabilat (which is a fuel used by industry)
- 21250m³ of recycled water which is reused in the Herhof plant for cooling
- 3400 ton of recycled metals
- 11,050 ton of inert material, which is used as a base in road constructions etc.
- 1,700 tons of dust which is removed by bag filters and pelletised

Dimitris Grammatas (CEO), Gail Gago and Roland Elmenhorst (Plant Manager) at Herhof
The entire plant is run by 12 people working over two shifts. It consists of a number of drying and composting boxes as well as separation areas. Over the period of a week all moisture is removed from the waste, to allow for the dry material to be separated and processed.

Stabilat (the fuel pellets produced) replaces fossil fuels like coal petroleum and natural gas. Because of its high organic content, Stabilat apparently releases less than 80% of the CO2 emissions from these other fuels.

I was impressed by the very low emissions from the plant including low levels of noise, dust and smell, I was advised that these remain well below the environmental emission standards for Europe. I was particularly impressive that the town’s household waste was almost completely turned into a usable product.

**Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government in Ireland**

Minister John Gormley hosted me for dinner in Dublin to discuss Ireland's successful ban of free plastic single use shopping bags.

Since early March 2002, an Environmental Levy has been charged on single use plastic shopping bags in Ireland. The original levy was 15 cents per bag and changed at the point of sale. On 1 July this year, the levy was increase to 22 cents to ensure its continuing effectiveness. The Levy is paid into the Irish Environmental Fund.

Certain types of bags are exempt from the levy, these include:

- Small plastic barrier bags for fresh meats, fruit and vegetables etc
- Reusable shopping bags that are sold for 70 cents or more
- Plastic bags used for specific purposes such as airport security measures.

This policy has been highly successful and led to an estimated 90% reduction in the number of single use plastic bags being used. Plastic bag per capita usage decreased overnight from an estimated 328 bags to 21. Prior to the levy plastic bags were considered to contribute 5% of litter, since the levy that has reduced to 0.2%.
The Minister felt that the public had received the ban on free plastic bags very well because of its environmental benefit and that this was a popular policy.

**Novamont**

On 30 August, I met with Catia Bastiolo, (CEO) and Alberto Castellanza, (Area Manager Asia / Pacific) to discuss the use of ‘Mater-Bi’ which is a 90% starch based product that is fully biodegradable. Mater-Bi can be used to produce a number of products, including mulching film, additives for tyres, toys, film for nappies, packaging, containers, cups, plastic food wrap and bags for food items and storage and waste collection.

I was advised that the products made from mater-bi take approximately 6 months to full degrade at a temperature of 58 degrees, and for home composting this time is longer as the temperature is often cooler. I was also advised that it is not toxic in the terrestrial or aquatic environment.
DRUG AND ALCOHOL POLICIES

The principle of harm minimisation has formed the basis of policies and programs in Australia and South Australia for over the past 20 years. Harm minimisation aims at the improving health, social and economic status of people with substance abuse problems and the wider community. Federal and State Governments have worked together over this time to provide comprehensive and balanced policies that embody the principles of harm minimisation.

The Australian policies and programs put in place to reduce harms associated with drug use are aimed at achieving abstinence as the goal. Evidence has shown that people often have many attempts in reaching a drug free lifestyle.

Broadly, reducing drug related dependence can be achieved through targeting a number of mechanisms, which include:

- disrupting the production and supply of illicit drugs, and controlling and regulating licit substances;
- preventing the uptake of harmful drug use, including abstinence orientated strategies and treatment to reduce drug use; and
- reducing drug-related harm to individuals and communities.

I am interested in exploring drug policies pursued by other countries.

Swedish Government

On the 24 August 2007, I met with Ms Maria Larsson (the Swedish Minister for Elderly Care and Public Health), Mr Ralf Lofstedt (Director, Special Expert Ministry of Health and Social Affairs), Ms Elisabet Aldenberg (Officer, Treatment).

Ms Larsson is one of three Ministers in the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, a ministry which deals with policy matters and legislation on health and medical care, public health, the rights of children, disability issues, elderly care, social services and social insurance. There are also several agencies committed to this ministry, and it is the role of those agencies to implement the current policy.

I was informed that the Swedish Government’s approach to drug related harm has a wide community focus incorporating family and society. Sweden, through its municipalities or county councils, has a very comprehensive public health and health insurance system that is used to support people who need to recover from sickness or injury. These municipalities have the ability to
collect taxation which is able to be used for the provision of health services, and social services in the community.

I was advised that in situation where a person is consider a ‘threat to life” the police or a social welfare office within a municipality has the ability to put a person into compulsory care. This decision needs to be verified and endorsed through a court order. The court order is based on an investigation by a social worker, however in acute situations a temporary order can be granted if necessary. Further assessments at 3 and 6 month intervals are conducted, and during this time a person will be encouraged to become a voluntary client.

While not widely used the Swedish Government does incorporate elements of harm minimisation. For many years there has been some use of methadone in treatment of clients if approved by a social worker. Needle exchange started in Sweden in the mid-1980s on a project basis. In 2006, the Swedish Government legislated to allow needle exchange programs across the country under certain conditions

South Australia and Sweden have similar positions on drug testing in schools and the workplace. I was advised that the Government does not legislate or regulate on this question however they were aware that some schools did carry out the practice of voluntary testing, with parental consent. Like in South Australia, the view within the Swedish Government was that legislating to drug test in schools could lead to distrust among teachers and students. The Swedish approach is to influence how a young person perceives drugs and it is important to maintain close connections with young people in their school years. In relation to workplaces, there may be circumstances that testing would be beneficial but it was a matter for individual workplaces to decide.

**Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN)**

Later that day, I met with Mr Bjorn Hibbel, Director of the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (commonly known as CAN) and Mr Ulf Guttormsson, Expert and Researcher with CAN. The Council consists of 40 member organisations and represents temperance organisations, parents, sports groups, youth and client groups.
CAN is a link between research and the community and one its key roles is through collection of information on drugs and alcohol, which is analysed and interpreted for their member organisations and the community. CAN also provides assistance with training courses, seminars and conferences. Drug prevention is the predominant focus of CAN. CAN was established in 1901 and is considered an important peak body funded by the Government.

Mr Guttormsson advised me that the availability of drugs in Sweden had increased compared with 1990s and prices have also declined since that time. Evidence also suggests that while there has a slight decrease in lifetime use prevalence, there is still a high use prevalence rate in 15-16 year olds within the past month.

The evidence provided by CAN about the number of drug related deaths in which drugs were either an underlying or contributing factor has been declining in the last decade. The CAN expert saw a correlation between the drop in drug related deaths and the timing of the introduction of methadone programs in Sweden in the late 1990s.

CAN also identified that alcohol consumption has increased when compared to the 1990s, except in relation to younger teenagers. Part of the solution to
this may be the existence of treatment facilities such as Maria Ungdom, which was visited that afternoon.

**Maria Ungdom - Sweden**

Maria Ungdom is a treatment facility that targets youth and teenagers. Ms Madeleine Skold (Psychologist), Ms Monika Bukowska (Psychiatrist), and Ms Maria Ringertz (Psychiatrist) provided an overview about the facility and the treatment they provide to teenagers.

The facility targets young people from 11 years through to 20 years old, who either have or are suspected of having a drug problem. Much of the problems that younger children face are alcohol related but Maria Ungdom will take any youth that presents with a problem. There are several different treatment options for clients, such as in patient and out patient services and these are carried out with family members support and assistance.

**Alcohol Focus Scotland**

On 27 August 2007 I met with Mr Jack Law (Chief Executive) and Jenny Jamieson from Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) in Glasgow. AFS is a national charity for alcohol issues. They are committed to improving quality of life by reducing excessive drinking. AFS advised me that alcohol abuse in Scotland is a serious problem. The alcohol related death rate in Scotland is double that of the UK as a whole. There is an alcohol related death in Scotland every 4 hours and over 40,000 people are hospitalised annually due to alcohol related conditions like liver disease.
AFS is concerned about the availability and pricing of alcohol in Scotland. Because alcohol is available more cheaply in supermarkets and is often the focus of displays, people purchase alcohol with their groceries and drink to excess before going out. Also beer is often cheaper than many soft drinks, including water, in pubs and clubs. Alcohol is now 60% more affordable than it was in the 1980s due to increased disposable incomes and discounting and AFS believes that this has increased the binge drinking culture amoung 18-25 year olds. Consequently, AFS are lobbying to decrease the affordability and availability of alcohol.

Another key target of AFS is educational work. There program Servewise is similar to the South Australian program Drinkwise. It aims to improve responsible standards in the sale of alcohol. AFS also run public education campaigns about the dangers of excess drinking as well as conducting research and specific projects.

**NHS - Health Scotland**

I also met with the Chair of the Board of NHS for Health Scotland, Councillor Lesley Hinds and CEO Graham Robertson as well as other officials regarding Scottish drug and alcohol approaches.

I received a briefing on the direction of drug policies in Scotland and I was advised that there is approximately one liquor licence for every 130 people in Scotland and that excess drinking is considered a significant social and health problem. Consumption of alcohol in Scotland continues to rise having risen by 23% in the last 10 years. Therefore the primary effort in substance abuse policy in Scotland is on alcohol over and above illicit drugs. They supplied me with copies of their recently updated Plan for Action on Alcohol Problems.

The Director of Mental Health Policy for Edinburgh, Emma Hogg, also provided a briefing on Scotlands evolving approach to mental health treatment, including early detection and intervention in self harm and suicide prevention. It was interesting to note that Scotland is adopting a very similar philosophy to South Australia and has recently adopted South Australia’s excellent Mental Health First Aid training program. I was also given copies of the new publication Delivering for Mental Health.
**OTHER VISITS**

**Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh**

I was privileged to visit the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. The Act to establish the first Parliament in Scotland since 1707 was passed in 1998 by the UK Parliament and the Parliament was officially opened by the Queen on 1 July 1999. The Scottish Parliament is in a building of contemporary design. There 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament. Each Scottish voter is represented by one constituency Member and Seven Regional Members.

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**Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Scotland**

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park incorporates a diverse range of landscapes from low lying area through to more mountainous areas as you move Northward through the Park. The National Park is over 1800 km square and it incorporates many lochs, rivers and woodlands in the area. The National Park is a highly visited area due to it’s close proximity to Scotland and its wonderful views, and the recreational opportunities it affords, such as walking, cycling and sailing.

The first overarching plan for this National Park was approved earlier this year and the excellent visitor interpretive centre will provide people with important knowledge they require to maintain and look after this National Park and its beauty.
Wicklow Mountains National Park, Ireland

Wicklow Mountains National Park is on the east coast of Ireland and is a mountain range covered with peat bog and heath, when in season. While conservation and preservation of biodiversity and the natural landscape is one of the key objectives of the management of the National Park, recreational access is also important.

I was advised by Wesley Atkinson (Manager) and Enda Mullen (District Conservation Officer) that sections of Wicklow Mountains National Park were purchased from the state forestry company and private landholders in the 1990s and as more land has become free from forestry plantings the Government has been able to include this in the Park.

Similarly to the management of Parks in South Australia, I was advised that establishing sustainable habitats and controlling pest plant and animal species are significant issues in Wicklow. In addition, fire management and cutting of peat present challenges in managing the Park.