

# CUAC Rural and Regional Network Newsletter

*Electricity, gas and water consumer issues in rural and regional areas*

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*In this spring edition of the Rural and Regional Network Newsletter we update readers on CUAC's work as part of the One Million Homes alliance, and our advocacy to the Victorian Government on climate change and energy efficiency. We also take a look at the findings of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission and the implications for electricity consumers.*

*CUAC is always keen to hear about on-the-ground issues for electricity, gas and water consumers in rural and regional Victoria. If you have an issue you would like to discuss, I invite you to get in touch with myself or the CUAC staff.*

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CUAC is an independent consumer advocacy organisation which ensures the interests of Victorian electricity, gas and water consumers—especially low income, disadvantaged, rural and regional, and Indigenous consumers—are effectively represented in the policy and regulatory debate.

CUAC believes all Victorians have a right to:

- affordable and sustainable electricity, gas and water
- have their interests heard in policy and regulatory decisions on electricity, gas and water
- not be disconnected from electricity, gas and/or water due solely to an inability to pay





## One Million Homes campaign gains momentum with release of Climate Change White Paper

Following months of procrastination by both sides of politics at the federal level, it was gratifying to see the Victorian Government commit to substantial improvements to energy efficiency policy with the release of its Climate Change White Paper on 26 July 2010.

A number of significant commitments are included in the White Paper. These include: a legislated reduction in Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions of 20 per cent in relation to 2000 levels; a feed-in tariff for larger scale solar installations; and the replacement of one quarter of Victoria's most greenhouse gas intensive generator, Hazelwood.

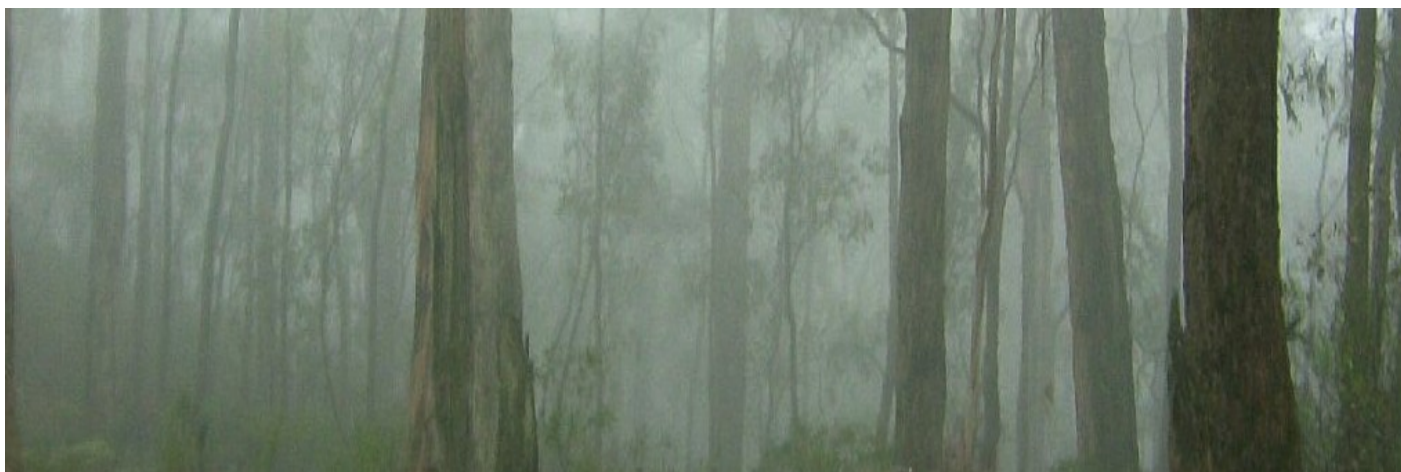
The most welcome announcements from an energy consumer's perspective were the commitments relating to energy efficiency. In particular, the White Paper includes a substantial commitment to improving the star rating of existing Victorian homes, from the current 2 stars to an average 5 stars energy efficiency rating. Additionally, the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target or Energy Saver Incentive scheme has had its energy efficiency target doubled and its scope has been expanded to a wider range of efficient technologies and to allow business to participate.

This is broadly in line with the policy outlined in the One million Homes Campaign program launched on 12 July 2010 by an alliance of 11 environment,

social justice and consumer groups, including CUAC. This campaign aims to improve almost half Victoria's houses over the next five years, with priority given to the homes of concession card holders including pensioners, low income families and renters. The Alliance has been gathering strong community support and now numbers 20 social welfare, environment, local government and business organisations. The program was promoted to all parties at the federal and state government level to gather broad political support.

While the Victorian Government's White Paper outlines some major targets for retrofitting housing stock including support for low income households and public housing tenants, it does not detail exactly how this is to be achieved. The first of a series of documents outlining the Government's approach to implementation is set to be released in the coming weeks.

CUAC has been active in advocating in support of the ideas set out in the One Million Homes campaign and on appropriate implementation of the White Paper more generally. On 21 September 2010, CUAC attended a roundtable with the Hon Gavin Jennings, Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Innovation, and the Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio, the Minister for Community Development, to discuss the Government's Climate Change White Paper and to press for the Government to take up the recommendations of the One Million Homes program.



## Bushfires taskforce report

On 31 July 2010 the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission delivered its final report to the Victorian Governor. The report suggested sweeping changes to the approach taken to fire and emergency management in the state. Included in the report were a number of recommendations of significance for Victoria's electricity supply system and electricity consumers.

Of most relevance to CUAC's work on behalf of electricity consumers, the Commission recommended that the State amend the regulations under Victoria's Electricity Safety Act 1998 and otherwise take such steps as may be required to give effect to the following:

- the progressive replacement of all SWER (single wire earth return) power lines in Victoria with aerial bundled cable, underground cabling or other technology that delivers greatly reduced bushfire risk. The replacement program should be completed in the areas of highest bushfire risk within 10 years and should continue in areas of lower bushfire risk as the lines reach the end of their engineering lives; and
- the progressive replacement of all 22-kilovolt distribution feeders with aerial bundled cable, underground cabling or other technology that delivers greatly reduced bushfire risk as the

feeders reach the end of their engineering lives. Priority should be given to distribution feeders in the areas of highest bushfire risk.

The government has indicated that more consultation is required on these recommendations. A consultation process with energy businesses, community groups and government is currently underway to further refine the possible government responses.

With regard to energy consumers, the significant issue is that underground or aerial bundled cable are particularly expensive types of electricity distribution lines. It is important to ensure that the costs of such a substantial infrastructure investment program do not outweigh the benefits. It is also important that responses are put in place to mitigate bushfire risk from our power system.

Energy Safe Victoria (ESV) has established a reference group, which includes CUAC, to consult on the issues involved in this area. They are conducting a project entitled the Bushfire Start Minimisation Review. Through our participation on this reference group, CUAC will ensure that the interests of consumers are represented to ESV and to the Victorian Government more generally.

For more information, go to [www.esv.vic.gov.au](http://www.esv.vic.gov.au) or [www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au](http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au)

## Murray Darling Basin Plan information sessions

The Australian Murray Darling Basin Authority will be holding Community Information Sessions on its *Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan* in October and November.

27 October	<b>Mildura</b> , Quality Hotel Mildura Grand, 9am-12pm, 2pm-5pm
28 October	<b>Melbourne</b> , Sofitel on Collins, 2pm-5pm
29 October	<b>Albury</b> , Commercial Club, 9am-12pm
8 November	<b>Moama</b> , Echuca-Moama Bowling Club, 10am-1pm
8 November	<b>Horsham</b> , Horsham Town Hall, 3pm-6pm

RSVP by calling 1800 230 067 (free call) or for more information visit:  
[www.mdba.gov.au](http://www.mdba.gov.au)

## Future of Public Housing report released

The Family and Community Development Committee of the Parliament of Victoria has released its report on the *Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria*.

The report quotes from CUAC's submission to the inquiry, which highlighted the need to ensure that energy efficiency and affordability are taken into account in the fit-out of public housing. The Committee concluded that "while recognising the costs of ongoing improvements, the Committee considered that there is a need to commit to improving the efficiency of homes rather than 'maintaining' them at levels that were basic twenty, thirty or more years ago."

The full report can be downloaded on the Committee's website at:  
[www.parliament.vic.gov.au/fcdc](http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/fcdc)

## Non-Mains Winter Energy Concession

Eligible customers buying LPG, non-mains electricity or an alternative fuel for domestic purposes can claim the Non-Mains Winter Energy concession. The concession is available for purchases from between 1 July and 30 November, with applications open through until January 2011.

Holders of Centrelink or Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) Pensioner Concession Cards, Centrelink Health Care Cards and DVA Gold Cards are eligible to claim the concession of between \$40 and \$283 (rebate amount depends on total amount spent on non-mains energy).

For further information and application forms see the Department of Human Services' Concessions Website at:  
[www.dhs.vic.gov.au](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au)

## Green start round two getting underway

Round two of the Commonwealth Government Green Start program is about to get underway. Guidelines are currently being developed for grants to organisations, including community and welfare sector NGOs, to provide practical help to low income and disadvantaged Australian households to improve their energy efficiency, including support for implementing projects or actions to reduce energy use.

Improving energy efficiency is an urgent priority and CUAC believes that low-income households need to be included—particularly during this period of rising prices.

Further details, including information for householders, on the Green Start website at:  
[www.climatechange.gov.au/government/programs-and-rebates/greenstart.aspx](http://www.climatechange.gov.au/government/programs-and-rebates/greenstart.aspx)