

Celebrating a decade in Queensland

By Jacqueline Ong

IN April 2007, the Bureau of Meteorology issued a tsunami warning for the east coast of Australia after detecting an earthquake in the South Pacific Ocean, rapper Snoop Dogg was banned from entering the country because he "did not meet the character requirements for a visa", and Spider-Man 3 premiered in Tokyo (if you didn't watch it, don't).

And on April 26, 2007, seven companies along with waste veteran Rick Ralph, came together to set up the Waste Recycling Industry Association of Queensland (WRIQ).

10 years on and WRIQ has made great leaps and bounds in and for the sector. *Inside Waste* sat down with WRIQ CEO Rick Ralph to reflect on the decade and celebrate the efforts of the association.

IW: Thinking about the last 10 years, how much has WRIQ changed from when it was first formed?

Ralph: We formed because industry needed recognition. Industry needed a voice, we needed to champion the industry, and we needed to be at the negotiation table. WRIQ's core being was brought about from regulation. The industry was being unduly targeted by both the Environmental Regulator and by Brisbane City Council over inner city noise collection issues so we brought the industry together to address those issues. We achieved that and the principle reason for forming WCRAQ, which was to give industry recognition and the platform in which it could advocate its issues, was now proven.

Initially we formed as a group of contractors. We branded as the Waste

Contractors and Recyclers Association. Five years into our journey, we recognised that something needed to change. We were being accommodated by stakeholders but we weren't being truly recognised. We undertook an extensive 360-degree consultation process with all stakeholders, political, non-political, members and the like, about our branding and position. We wanted to be recognised as the waste and recycling industry. We didn't want to be seen as a just a group of self-interested contractors, we wanted to be acknowledged as a professional industry body, a professional industry stakeholder in the community.

IW: And of course, WRIQ had to evolve as the sector evolved. How much has changed in Queensland since 2007?

Ralph: There are three significant changes WRIQ has been instrumental in achieving. Firstly, the industry is now recognised, both in a political and in a business sense. It is now acknowledged as a crucial stakeholder in regulation and policy conversations with government. The second is the reforms that we're just about to see realised and that will really be the landscape change. It's taken us a lot longer than expected but when you have nine ministers and 10 director generals in charge of the central agency we have had to advocate with over 10 years, you're never going to get there fast.

The new regulatory framework will be the pivotal change for the future and our industry members have been front and centre in re-shaping that agenda. The proposed revisions to the regulatory ERA framework is going to be a game changer. Thirdly and arguably in my opinion, the most important success is about the thousands of Queenslanders our members employ, the people in the industry who are now recognised for what they are and for what they do. The industry has a profile; the members have a profile with our stakeholders. We don't just get blindsided all the time with different agendas although that will always happen when you have so many political agendas flowing.

We now actually get meaningful engagement and I think that's the best you could ever possibly hope for. There has been a fundamental step change and, 10 years on, the WRI branding and



governance model has a place in NT, in SA, and by the end of June, we will have WRI in WA established.

IW: What have been the key lessons that help drive WRIQ forward?

Ralph: We're always learning. One lesson is you have to lead - you can't be a follower in policy and you must adapt and listen to other views. Be respectful but importantly, you have to know when to step away from the table and if something's not correct, you'll just have to say no, you can't accommodate that position. It's about balance.

You need to understand the political cycle. Australia in 2017 in political terms in my opinion is in an abyss. We want good political leaders but regrettably, I think our political landscape at the moment is so mainstream and boring, and our political leaders are far too focused on the next election result that they're genuinely not focused on the national drivers. As a result of that, our industry gets caught up in that policy vortex. We're barely living from cycle to cycle and from an industry body, for the next 10 years, we need to articulate a clear industry policy position, we need to educate stakeholders on that policy position, and we need to advocate and look beyond the simple four-year electoral cycle.

IW: What have you been most proud of when you think back on the last decade?

Ralph: The thing that gives me the greatest smile looking back on the 10 years is we now have professional industry bodies in which members and our people can network with purpose.

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10 years on and WRIQ has made leaps and bounds in and for the sector in Queensland. (Pictured: Surfers Paradise, credit: Rex Boggs, Flickr CC)



WRIQ CEO Rick Ralph.

We've got the WRIQ professional women's networking group and we've got a future industry leaders program where we're trying to identify networking opportunities to get outside, to get industry employees talking. Those are big milestones because now, the people who make up this industry, the real achievers behind the scenes have a proper and effective vehicle in which to drive the industry.

And of course, the recent creation of a single WRI model in Queensland has culminated recently in a National Council being formed. That in my mind is testament of the credibility and the professionalism of what the WRI brand has become and it is personally one of my greatest career highlights and achievements following more than 36 years working in the sector

IW: What's the next 10 years going to look like?

Ralph: Profound change. We have to be cognizant to the fact that

Queensland will, at some point after the next election, be facing some sort of economic instrument. Call it a levy, call it a tax, call it what you will but we will have some mechanism. The critical thing is not to let political interference and other interests that are non-waste or recycling-related interfere or distract from the discussion. What government did to us and many of our members last time when they had a go was scandalous and they arguably left a number of my members financially worse off, but handed millions to local government without any thought. We were left with idle assets and investment. We've invested heavily in getting the baseline right in terms of regulation for all and we can't afford to have that happen again.

However, the single greatest threat as an industry we are now facing is the mischief that our local government representatives seem to be playing and using waste as a puppet to manipulate

new ways of generating revenues in a non-transparent manner. The development of these issues where we're seeing councils developing their own new local laws, and as result, the potential to create absolutely perverse operating environments prohibiting their commercial ratepayers and businesses from having choice of service provider is a huge threat and unresolved, creates great uncertainty over whether you would want to invest in Queensland. I'm gravely concerned at the lack of understanding of many of our elected representatives to truly appreciate what the private sector does, how we do it, and the importance that innovation, investment and consumer confidence come from having a competitive operating environment and not as we now have in two possibly three local government jurisdictions that in 2017, prohibit customer choice and open competition. This is a really slippery slope and one we must now eliminate.

IW: What do you want to achieve in 10 years?

Ralph: Two things, I want policy for the industry removed from our regulator's control into a Science, Innovation and Business portfolio of government. The current model where a sector's regulator sets policy for that industry is broken, it's finished, and it's disruptive to business confidence.

Importantly, I want to see greater and formal recognition of the people who work within this industry by all our stakeholders, including our political representatives. If these community representatives clearly understand their decisions are impacting our

people's lives and members' businesses and investment, and there is a human component both in terms of cost and opportunity, then perhaps they may have second thoughts about some of the political self-driven agendas we are so often now faced with. That's a great challenge - to educate our stakeholders on the importance and the value of our people and in turn, that of our industry.

IW: Finally, how is WRIQ celebrating its 10th anniversary?

Ralph: Leading up to the last week of July, we're going to have an industry equipment demonstration day to showcase some of the clever stuff that we do in equipment for our suppliers. We're also going to hold an industry forum looking at innovation and non-regulatory issues on July 28. It will culminate in the annual dinner on Saturday, July 29.

This year, we'll be introducing new recognition for employees of the industry, whether they've been with one company or 10 companies, it doesn't matter, but anyone who's been in the industry for 25 years or more, we are introducing new recognition for their services to the industry because we're only as good as the people who work within our industry and that's what the WRI model has become.

We must recognise daily the importance of our people, of maintaining safe workplaces and ensuring everyone goes home to their families every day, and that is the purpose of the dinner and the awards. We're professional industry people with wonderful attributes and really strong skills and full of great characters and great mentors. **IW**