

## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AUSTRALIA PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2024-2025

### ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CRITICAL WORKFORCE SHORTAGE

**REQUEST:** \$5.2 million for:

1. \$200,000 for a nationwide workforce study to understand the extent of the chronic workforce shortage particularly in regional, remote and indigenous communities. This would include analysis of the current shortages and predictions with extensive retirements in coming years due to the “baby boomer” generation leaving the workforce.
2. \$4 million towards education, training and professional development to build and retain a skilled environmental health workforce. This includes providing up to \$70,000 for 20 Cadet EHOs (State and Local governments) and contributing up to \$10,000 towards university tuition for cadets OR the cost of an EHA accredited qualification (undergraduate or postgraduate ~\$9,000 - \$15,000) a year for up to four years.
3. \$1 million to market the profession to encourage enrolments in EHA accredited qualifications to build the future environmental health workforce. This includes promotion of pathways from Diploma to EHA accredited undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

***The time to develop an adequately skilled environmental health workforce is now!***

Environmental Health Australia Ltd (EHA ) is the premier environmental health professional organisation in Australia which advocates environmental health issues and represents the professional interests of all environmental health practitioners. EHA is committed to the professional development and status of its members and the enhancement of environmental health standards and services to the community through advocacy, promotion, education and leadership. The professional organisation has been in existence since 1936 and has undergone several name changes over time to reflect the changing nature of the organisation and its membership. EHA is a member of the International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH) and represents environmental health at the National and International level through our relationships with all stakeholders.

The environmental health profession is a specialised and niche occupation that utilises the science and practice of environmental health to provide preventative and compliance roles to support public health. Environmental health professionals are employed across all levels of government including the Australian Defence Force, in universities and in private enterprise. Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) are front-line workers responsible for regulating public health protection.

The workforce shortage of Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) is at a critical level. Environmental health professionals are frontline workers protecting communities by managing food safety, water quality, waste management and infection control including management of vectors. EHOs are uniquely qualified to manage local risks and hazards in emergency and disaster management situations and improve climate resilience.

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## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AUSTRALIA

The shortage of environmental health professionals has significant implications for Local and State Government capacity to deliver important services to communities, meet statutory obligations and severely limits the ability of the health system to adequately respond to public health emergencies.

Several recent reports highlight the critical shortage of environmental health officers. A common theme across reports in reference to the environmental health profession is the lack of recognition of the value and importance of the work and capabilities of EHOs. Resourcing and the need for an increased resilient and skilled environmental health workforce was identified as a common challenge.

Recent reports include:

### *NATIONAL*

The Jobs and Skills Australia 2023 Skills Priority List<sup>1</sup> identifies Environmental Health Officers as experiencing regional shortages at the national level. EHA challenges this finding as workforce reports show a dire shortage of environmental health officers across all jurisdictions in Australia. Several state governments, cooperatively with local government associations, have completed workforce studies. The results of these studies are summarised below.

In the 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills Capability Survey, Environmental health officers (inspectors) were cited as one of the top three skill shortage areas experienced by local governments.<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in local governments recruiting less skills applicants and has resulted in environmental health officers being placed on the “critical occupational skills shortage” list.<sup>3</sup> This report highlights that environmental health officers were one of the hardest occupation to fill<sup>4</sup> and there is a critical skills gap which could be the result of insufficient cadets.<sup>5</sup>

### *WESTERN AUSTRALIA*

In the 2023 Local Government Workforce Shortage Survey, Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) were identified to be critical and amongst one of the hardest occupations to fill.<sup>6</sup>

### *VICTORIA*

The 2023 report from the Auditor General’s Office<sup>7</sup> indicated that Council EHOs handle a diverse range of public health duties, including food safety. Workforce shortages are affecting councils’ ability to source appropriately qualified EHOs, especially in rural areas. “Workforce issues pose a risk to the effective administration of food safety regulation in Victoria.”<sup>8</sup>

The Victorian report acknowledges that the work of EHOs is diverse, and they have responsibility for a number of regulatory functions including:

- Food Act
- the PHWA and Public Health and Wellbeing Regulations 2019 (including managing nuisances)
- the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 and Residential Tenancies (Caravan Parks and Moveable Dwellings Registration and Standards) Regulations 2020 (such as rooming house regulation)

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<sup>1</sup> Jobs and Skills Australia 2023 Skills Priority List Key Findings Report, September 2023

<sup>2</sup> 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills Capability Survey, Final report, November 2022, page 13

<sup>3</sup> 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills Capability Survey, Final report, November 2022, page 53

<sup>4</sup> 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills Capability Survey, Final report, November 2022, page 57

<sup>5</sup> 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills Capability Survey, Final report, November 2022, page 58

<sup>6</sup> 2023 Local Government Workforce Shortage Survey in Western Australia, Local Government Professional Australia WA, page 4

<sup>7</sup> Victorian Auditor-General’s Office: Regulating Food Safety, June 2023

<sup>8</sup> Victorian Auditor-General’s Office: Regulating Food Safety, June 2023, page 6

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- the Environment Protection Act 2017 and Environmental Protection Regulations 2021 (such as septic tank inspections)
- specific local laws of each local government area (for example, smoking on council land)
- Emergency Management Act 2013 (such as responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and storm, flood and fire events)
- Tobacco Act 1987 (including education and enforcement).<sup>9</sup>

A marketing strategy will highlight the diverse nature of the profession, showcasing the opportunity to work across climate change issues, emergency management, disaster risk reduction, food safety and health and wellbeing.

### NEW SOUTH WALES

The 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills and Capability Survey for New South Wales identified that “Many local governments expressed concerns about losing environmental health staff as the demand for their skills in other contexts suddenly escalated, creating gaps in being able to fill positions requiring a high level of skills in environmental health inspection.”<sup>10</sup> In this report, environmental health officers have been listed as a skills shortage in rural, urban and urban fringe local governments. The profession has also been listed as a critical occupational shortage for local government in the future.<sup>11</sup>

### SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The report on Environmental Health Officers’ (EHOs) response to COVID-19 identified that a lack of resources resulted in a workforce shortage, which increased the workloads for all EHOs. The lack of support was identified as a crucial future workforce concern impacting on the preparedness of the profession to deal with emerging challenges arising due to climate change.<sup>12</sup>

### TASMANIA

In The Future of Local Government Review, final report, October 2023, EHOs were identified as one of the top five areas of workforce shortage,<sup>13</sup>. This workforce shortage in Tasmania has manifesting in substandard delivery of important regulatory functions and majority of the councils are failing to meet the required standards.<sup>14</sup>

### MARKETING

*What is environmental health?* Environmental health needs to be marketed and promoted as a science-based profession with diverse and challenging job opportunities. A marketing strategy will include television and radio advertising.

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<sup>9</sup> Victorian Auditor-General’s Office: Regulating Food Safety, June 2023, page 18

<sup>10</sup> 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills and Capability Survey, New South Wales Report, page 68

<sup>11</sup> 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills and Capability Survey, New South Wales Report, pages 42, 43, 44

<sup>12</sup> Environmental Health Officers’ (EHOs) response to COVID-19: A public health workforce needs assessment to ensure sustainability and future preparedness, Flinders University, December 2021, page 51

<sup>13</sup> The Future of Local Government Review, Final report, October 2023, Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet, page 39

<sup>14</sup> The Future of Local Government Review, Final report, October 2023, Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet, page 52



EHA accredits ten universities across Australia to deliver accredited undergraduate and post graduate qualifications in environmental health. Universities are required to meet criteria outlined in the enHealth skills and knowledge matrix which ensures the graduates have the skills, knowledge and capability to be appointed as authorised officers in all jurisdictions across Australia. Current university enrolments in EHA accredited environmental health qualifications are low and at risk of being discontinued or merged with other health sciences qualifications. This is due to environmental health not being properly recognised as an occupation and to some extent the effectiveness of the various preventative and compliance roles the profession undertakes. It is only when systems start to break down due to short staffing that the effectiveness in controlling disease outbreaks and community safety become evident, often with catastrophic results.

### SUMMARY

The 2024-25 Commonwealth Budget needs to recognise the importance of the environmental health profession and provide funding for the profession to better protect public health and the future wellbeing of all communities in Australia.

Environmental Health Australia calls on the Commonwealth Government to invest in building the environmental health profession by funding:

Activity	Amount	Term
A nationwide workforce study to understand the extent of the chronic workforce shortage particularly in regional, remote and indigenous communities and to understand the impact of “baby boomers” leaving the workforce.	\$200,000	One year
Education, training and professional development to build and retain a skilled environmental health workforce. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide up to \$70,000 for at least 20 Cadet EHOs (State and Local governments).</li> <li>- Contribute up to \$10,000 towards university tuition for cadets OR the cost of an EHA accredited qualification (undergraduate or postgraduate ~\$9,000 - \$15,000) a year for up to four years</li> </ul>	\$2.8 million	Two years
	\$1.2 million	Four years
Marketing of the profession to encourage enrolments in EHA accredited qualifications to build the future environmental health workforce. This includes promotion of pathways from Diploma to EHA accredited qualifications.	\$1 million	Two years

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PO Box 2222 Fortitude Valley QLD 4006 ♦ P: 07 3554 0115 ♦ E: [national@eh.org.au](mailto:national@eh.org.au) ♦ ABN: 58 000 031 998

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