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The industry in perspective

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AT THE AQA AGM, HELD DURING THE COMBINED AQA AND IOQ 49TH INDUSTRY CONFERENCE, THE ASSOCIATION CHAIR SUMMED UP THE SITUATION FOR THE INDUSTRY. BY ALAN TITCHALL.

“The only thing that is constant is change,” said AQA chair Brian Roche, quoting the wise words of a Greek philosopher.

“The winds of change are certainly again blowing for our industry. Next year we will mark half a century of conferences. I want to say to you that we need to embrace change and make it work for our quarry industry over the next 50 years.”

One of those new directions is a possible merging of industry associations and representations, following the Stevenson Group (a major funder of associations) complaint that it wanted one organisation to represent the extractives industry.

“The AQA board rightly took that to heart,” said Brian.

“We began some review work and started the necessary approaches to IOQNZ. In February, things accelerated with a strategic review of MinEx – the Mining Extractives Health and Safety Council, which is largely funded through the levies we attach to your AQA fees.”

Brian said Stevenson’s managing director Mark Franklin had been working with other industry players and it is clear that some will not fund any industry organisations other than a ‘peak’ organisation beyond early next year, while recognising that IOQ (and AusIMM) were individual membership based organisations that would and should continue.

There are a range of organisations representing extraction, including the AQA, IOQNZ, MinEx, Straterra, the Coal Association, AusIMM.

The AQA collected around \$73,500 for the MinEx levy and paid out another \$10,500 on top of that, contributing to a deficit of around \$20,000 for the 2016/17 year.

“I have to report that there was general agreement at that February meeting – attended by about 20 quarrying and mining representatives – that a peak organisation does, on the face of it, make sense.

“I want to say to you that I personally support the creation of one body to represent extractives, so long as quarrying is front and centre in that organisation. And, providing we, as big or small companies, all get an equal say in deciding what change we want.”

GETTING THE PROPER CREDIT

Another theme Brian discussed was the lack of recognition the quarry industry received at a local and central government level.

“The latest available production figures show that in 2015 we produced 39 million tonnes of aggregates including limestone and other products. AQA members accounted for more than 80 percent of that production. Direct production revenue in 2015 was \$502 million and the estimated economic benefit of quarrying to our country (direct, indirect and induced) is \$2.1 billion. About 10,000 jobs rely on aggregate.

“Quarrying is a big and important industry but outside the quarry gates you’d hardly know it. We just don’t get the attention we deserve.

“An example? We tried to get a panel discussion up at this conference of our political leaders. We couldn’t get the Prime Minister, the minister in charge of our sector, or representatives from most of our parties to attend.”

However, the then Opposition spokesman for Economic Development, Stuart Nash, now Minister for Police, Small Business and Fisheries was the only MP to address the July conference after the poor response from other parties. He said quarrying was the unsung hero of the nation’s economy and the foundation of everything that was built.

Brian noted that back in 2008, when we had the last change of government, the AQA board commissioned the 'Foundations for our Future' document that noted: No national strategy for the development of aggregate supplies; no formal mechanism for industry liaison with government; no recognition in national transport and infrastructural development planning on the need for proximate resources; and no requirement for local bodies to include provision for local aggregate resources in their long-term plans.

"We have had virtually no or little progress on any of those failings of the last government since the current government took office nine years ago."

The simple reason, he suggests, is the industry doesn't command the political attention and its current association has not got the resources to make a change.

"They serve us well, but the truth is we are up against other primary industries like the dairy sector, or forestry, or fishing, which have fleets of staff and budgets big enough to command the interest of the politicians and the public.

"They tell their industry stories time and time again – on television, on billboards, in media, at parliament.

"We don't do that very well as the extractives sector, in large part because we are fragmented. While there are major differences between quarrying and mining, we all earn our living from what we extract.

"If we can do it right – and recognising our Greek philosopher's constant state of change has seen coal production drop like a stone and quarrying continuing to rise – then our industry could be at the heart of one strong well-funded organisation; one which has the capacity to put our case to government, media and the public."

OTHER ISSUES

The high level of CoC oral exam failures is of major concern, says Brian. "When we learned of failure rates exceeding 60 percent we called a special meeting in February attended by WorkSafe's chief inspector for Extractives, Mark Pizey.

"Out of that meeting came some initiatives which included: Creating a bank of oral exam questions so candidates knew what sorts of things they'd face; supporting Site Specific CoCs as an interim measure while there was a fuller review of CoC requirements; working with WorkSafe on issues including advice on what documents could be taken into oral exams and moderation of the exam panels to ensure better consistency; and working with trainers and MITO on the mismatch of training and exam requirements."

At the time of the 2017 conference, the association had seen improvements, with a high pass level for those re-sitting orals.

Working with IOQ, the association also revamped the annual 2017 QuarryNZ conference so as to maximise CPD hours for attendees.

"But, frankly, we should not have got to the point where many quarry operators, big and small, have people managing quarries without current CoCs."

Since that statement, between July 19 and September 20 some 80 percent of all oral exam candidates were found competent and 18 out of 23 (78 percent) B-grade quarry manager applicants were found competent.

The AQA says it believes this is the result of industry initiatives such as oral exam mentoring, training programmes, and better preparation by employers. Applicants are reminded that oral exams assess an applicant's ability to respond to workplace situations by using good workplace practice.

Brian also said at the AGM in July that a meeting between the AQA board and new WorkSafe CEO Nicole Rosie acknowledged that focusing on 'every risk' will do nothing to reduce serious injuries and fatalities, as opposed to looking at critical risks in the industry first.

"And I think we can expect that to become a welcome refreshed mission for WorkSafe."

Less successfully, he says, the new quarry regulations promised are now in limbo and it is being suggested they shouldn't have been promised in the first place.

"This is not what our industry wants or expects.

"An AQA group (with input from IOQNZ) submitted to WorkSafe and MBIE with multiple issues over the current regulations – particularly around the fact that quarries don't believe senior site executives will make them a safer place to work, and that Principal Hazard Management Plans will clog up the system and create more paper to blind us from the real objective of getting out in our quarries and making sure things are done safely."

Brian says the board will continue to press the government for fit for purpose regulations and deal properly with the needs of quarries through input to the new health and safety management system template by the AQA and Wayne Scott, the new CEO for MinEx.

SILICA

Another current challenge is the issue of silica dust.

"Last conference we were warned by Ken Slattery, chief executive of Cement Concrete Aggregate Australia, that matching Australia's standard for airborne silica would not be the end of it.

"It still came as something of a shock for Canterbury's regional council to slap a total ban on any dust emerging from quarries at Yaldhurst.

"The implication was that harmful levels of respirable crystalline silica were in the dust – though the science did not seem to show that and quarry organisations overseas had never heard of neighbours being affected."

Brian says the AQA challenged this ban publicly and proactively on the basis that such a total dust ban would dustbin a whole range of economic activity, including river works by the same regional council.

"We haven't heard much since, but an AQA member recently reported a resource consent objection from a neighbour, based, it seems, on the Canterbury media reports about dust.

"I advise you all to be alert to this issue and ensure your staff are tested for respirable crystalline silica."

PREPARING FOR CHANGE

The AQA says a single body for the extractive sector could emerge next year and, in expectations of major change, it has not put its usual effort into producing a long term business plan.

“The AQA also faces the financial realities of ongoing industry consolidation. When one quarry group buys an existing operator, the AQA can lose membership fees.

“This financial year there were 53 full members (down one), 11 associate members and \$309,013 in subscriptions invoiced. This includes a 33 percent levy paid to the Mining Extractives Health and Safety Council, MinEx.

This article first appeared in **Q&M's** December/January issue.

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