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01 Nov 2013

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**Firms improving environmental performance, but emissions up**

By Renu Prasad | Wednesday, 13 November 2013



Australian law firms are improving their performance on key environmental measures such as electricity use and paper consumption – but travel-related carbon emissions and overall carbon emissions from firms are still on the rise.

These were the findings of a survey covering firms which were members of the Australian Legal Sector Alliance (AusLSA), an industry-led association which aims to promote sustainable practices across the legal sector. Not all AusLSA member firms chose to participate in the survey and this year's survey was completed by 31 firms, including nine of the 10 largest Australian firms. A full list of participants is provided at the bottom of this story; all ten of the largest firms are expected to participate in 2014.

Key findings were that paper and electricity consumption had declined. While travel emissions

were higher than FY2012, the report authors said that there were signs that this activity was starting to "level off". These observations were made partly by reference to data collected from the "executive membership group" – the group of firms who had participated in the survey each year since its inception in FY2010. The authors warned that the growing number of participating firms each year meant that year-on-year comparisons outside this core group should be approached with caution.

The Australian economy deteriorated significantly in FY2013, which raises the question of whether firms are reducing their consumption footprint in response to economic conditions rather than improved environmental awareness. However, AusLSA director Stuart Clark said that there were indications that there were genuine reforms occurring.

"We would be concerned if it was just the economy," he said. "However, we have seen [these trends] over an extended period and independent of economic conditions."

Clark added that cyclical factors would also encourage permanent reforms. "The economy has helped people recognise alternatives, such as video conferencing instead of air travel – so yes, there is an economic impact, but this will encourage systemic changes," he said. He predicted that an increasing acceptance of technology would help off-set an increase in air travel as a result of firms entering global mergers and conducting more global transactions. Overall, air travel increased among member firms in FY2013 although firms which were part of the AusLSA executive membership managed to reduce their travel emissions.

The key findings of the survey were:

- Electricity use declined in FY2013 on a per-head basis. On average, 2.92 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (t CO2e) were emitted for each staff member from firms' electricity use during FY2013.
- Emissions from business travel - primarily flights - showed some signs of steadying and even reducing among the main cohort of reporting firms, following a notable increase between FY2010 and 2012. Average travel emissions per head for FY2103 were 1.93t CO2e.
- Paper use is decreasing, with firms reportedly using nearly 122kg of paper per employee in FY2013. This has decreased by around 2% since last year.
- The uptake of carbon emission offsetting slowed in FY2013, with 11 out of 31 firms offsetting their carbon emissions in FY2013.

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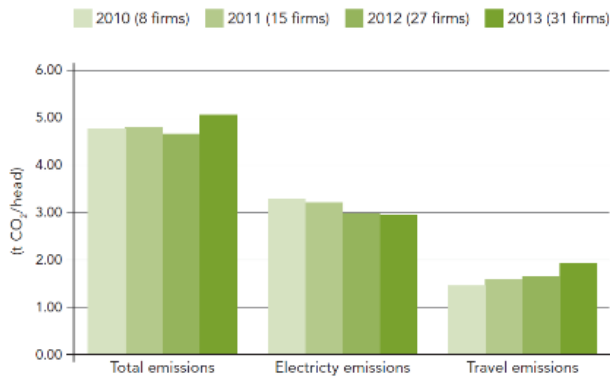
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Participating firms were as follows:

Ashurst  
Blands Law  
Carroll & O'Dea  
Clayton Utz  
Coleman Greig  
Cooper Grace Ward  
Corrs Chambers Westgarth  
DLA Piper  
FB Rice  
Gadens  
Hall & Wilcox  
Harwood Andrews  
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