



W. A. CHAMBER  
OF COMMERCE  
AND INDUSTRY

# WEST AUSTRALIAN Business World

THE VOICE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Registered by Australia Post Publication No WBG0079

MAY, 1987

## Solar energy suffers a loss of interest

Research and development into solar energy, in which Western Australia led the way, is in a mess.

According to experts in the field, the state that supposedly was leading the way in solar energy research and application seems to have almost lost interest in the subject.

Certainly its public sector has.

In fact the state government with its decision to scrap the Solar Energy Research Institute of WA (SERIWA) late last year has virtually baled out of the subject.

### Develop

Comments made by several sources have been that the action is a long way from the state government's last election platform that included a determination to develop an energy research institute that would not only conduct research but also have a public information dissemination service on the subject.

The situation with respect to public sector research in solar energy is that the four man research unit from the original 14 man SERIWA organisation would have been lost had it not been rescued by Murdoch University.

And even with the University involvement, there is some doubt hanging over the future of the team, and the thousands of dollars worth of equipment it has.

Speak to authorities on solar energy research in WA and you get confusion.

Seek information on alternative power sources and information on solar efficient housing, as was going to be supplied, and is readily available in most other states of Australia and there is an almighty void.

Chairman of the Low Energy Building Council within the Housing Industry Association, architect, Garry Baverstock describes the situation in WA as an almighty mess.

"For a state with so much potential for housing and buildings in general to be energy efficient, and for solar energy to play a big part it is a crying shame," he said.

A Murdoch University spokesman told WABW that the government had effectively put work in

WA on the solar field on the back burner.

He considered the attitude surprising, but thought that with the decrease in concern for energy at the moment due to controlled oil prices, solar energy probably had less political appeal than it once had.

### Slashed

A representative of the State Energy Commission said he thought the government had slashed its budget hastily during the nursing strike late last year.

The government appeared to have given little thought to details as ministers made patch-up promises and indicated it was merely re-organisation rather than the dropping of SERIWA'S services.

In reality they probably didn't have the slightest idea as to how it would all be sorted out.

The situation at the moment is that SERIWA, which was in effect an extension of the State Energy Commission is out of action with the exception of four members of its

research and development unit.

This unit is having its salaries paid by the SEC until the end of this year when it is to be taken over by Murdoch University for inclusion in its energy research institute.

The University's energy division is primarily involved in other energy research areas.

It is tacking the solar research unit on for a minimum of five years if it can be virtually self supporting by winning research contracts from outside organisations.

With respect to SERIWA's equipment it is thought that some will go to Murdoch while much of it may be scrapped.

An area presenting a constant headache for the SEC is that of SERIWA's previous activity of giving the public advice on a whole range of alternative energy topics as well as helping with designs of functional energy efficient buildings.

Hundreds of requests for advice are being

turned away as the SEC's advice on energy beyond gas and electricity only extends to solar hot water systems — "despite what the government says," said the Department officer.

### Role

One SEC staff member, who prefers, like the other government employees, to have his name withheld, said it was probably never imagined how many queries there would be for information, and probably the role that SERIWA had undertaken had never been fully understood.

He said it was unfortunate, as Murdoch University has made it definite that it does not see itself as being a general public information service.

The University gives advice as far as is usual for an academic/research institution but will not go into producing brochures etc for everyday public consumption as SERIWA did.

The Murdoch University spokesman added to the tale of woe, stating that a significant loss to Western Australia was

## Solar search lacks future

From Page 1

SERIWA's expert testing service which will not be picked up by any other organisation.

Mr Baverstock, co-author of a manual, "Low Energy Buildings in Australia", which was brought about by the help of capital from

SERIWA said he felt channelling the remnants of the organisation into an academic institution was really no direction at all.

"Apart from keeping people occupied it is unlikely to be accessible to the public for information and it stands a good chance of heading into directionless research with little practical application," he said.

### Awareness

Mr Baverstock said he believed there had been some failings with SERIWA among them a failure to promote, educate and create a greater awareness of the practicalities of solar energy in areas where it is economical viable to apply it.

He said it too had sometimes been guilty of researching into high technology and mechanically intriguing devices, often with little chance of economic viability.