

By email: standards@pc.gov.au

21 April 2006

Standards and Accreditation Study  
Productivity Commission  
PO Box 80  
BELCONNEN ACT 2616

Dear Sirs

**Standards and Accreditation Study**

This letter is to register NATSPEC's interest and willingness to participate in dialogue relating to your above research study. We have briefly outlined who we are and our relationship to your study as well as our concerns which we hope your study will address.

Yours truly

Richard S Choy  
NATSPEC CEO

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NATSPEC

NATSPEC is the trading name of Construction Information Systems Limited, ABN 20 117 574 606.

NATSPEC, founded in 1975, is a not-for-profit organisation that is owned by the design, build, construct and property industry through the support of professional associations and government property groups. NATSPEC's major service is the comprehensive national specification system endorsed by government and professional bodies. The specification is for all building structures with specialist packages for architects, interior designers, landscape architects, structural engineers, service engineers and domestic owners.

NATSPEC's aims are to provide economies of scale for its stakeholders and to improve the quality of construction in Australia via the provision of information, tools, products and services.

A national master specification was desired because it is not economical or efficient for each individual consulting practice to monitor all the changes in regulations, standards and product/technology improvement. There are huge efficiency gains when the national master specification is so commonly used that the expectation of a known level of quality is taken as standard. Further, in Australia, it is appropriate that the system is national because the building industry is national with common materials, construction techniques and procurement strategies.

A quality specification must clearly demonstrate compliance to the BCA and other relevant authorities. NATSPEC identifies these issues and offers guidance to the writer for implementation. The benchmark of quality set by the BCA is built upon by the incorporation of Australian Standards and feedback from industry. A report by the late Bryce Mortlock, the founder of NATSPEC noted:

*'Nothing could be more necessary, more logical, more timely or more useful in today's building industry or more responsive to the call for quality control than a specification system tied to relevant Australian Standards.'*<sup>1</sup>

NATSPEC remains true to these sentiments. A large number of Standards in addition to those referred to in the BCA are cited and where appropriate, some worksections are predicated on a Standard e.g. *Brick and block construction* is built around AS 3700.

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<sup>1</sup> RAI A Practice division report, NATSPEC, August 1989.

## Issues

- a) The efficiency and effectiveness of standards setting and laboratory accreditation services in Australia

A centralised national system together or separately is required to enable uniformity of purpose, style and content; restrict duplication and contradictions; and, simplify the point of information retrieval. Whilst there are opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness a move to dilute the independent overseeing bodies will increase opportunities for those with vested interests or loudest voices to bias standards.

Maintenance (keeping up-to-date) of Standards is one of the most expensive exercises undertaken by Standards Australia. Accordingly their priorities are swayed by the demand/supply equation and there is a need to fill the gap when the Australian Standard is withdrawn. One option may be to adopt an international standard.

The main reason Australian consultants and clients wish to adhere to Australian Standards and NATA test results is to be assured of a baseline level of OH&S and an affordable level of quality. Manufacturers obtain a product assurance and marketing edge from NATA testing and it is appropriate that the user pays. Multiple testing sites allow competitive pricing and hence are appropriate. The use of Australian Standards by designers is in the national interest regarding OH&S and it is suggested that any Australian Standard cited in the BCA should be provided electronically for free. Consideration should also be given for on-line read-only versions of other Standards or that associations and not-for-profit organisations like NATSPEC are permitted to reproduce up to 10% of a Standard at nil cost. As Standards Australia no longer has need of its commercial arm we assume that the above does not affect its revenues.

Whilst there is much discussion on the move to accepting/adopting international standards it has been commonly known that achieving the benchmark for all aspects of a product or industry is neither economical nor effective. One should only benchmark aspects that will provide a return, economical or otherwise. We should continue to move to international standards only when appropriate and preferably where we have had a say in its development.

- b) The appropriate role of the Australian Government

The Australian nation gains productivity, international competitiveness and setting acceptable levels of OH&S via national standards and testing. Adhering to a user-pays philosophy it is appropriate that the Australian Government support the system. It should encourage participation on Standards Committees by its appropriate technical personnel and support the participation by recognised leading experts in industry who do not have the financial capacity to participate voluntarily.

If the Government had no influence on the work of Standards Australia and NATA then the focus may not necessarily be on the issues of national interest.

- c) Appropriate terms for MoU

It is in the national interest for Australia to be represented on the international stage and the MoU should provide Standards Australia with the appropriate authority and recognition.

- d) Government funding

It is in the national interest to ensure these bodies maintain their altruistic focus and not become driven by the bottom line. Consideration should be given to funding all their activities where they are representing the interest of Australia in agreed international forums.