

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES and FORESTRY

Inquiry into future water supplies for Australia's rural industries and communities

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Secretary: ... *[Signature]* ...

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES
AND FORESTRY

SUMMARY

The committee chair, Mrs Kay Elson MP got it right when she said "Getting water management right, so that water is available when and where it is needed on a sustainable basis, is crucial not only for the prosperity of rural Australia, but the nation as a whole." "We cannot afford, as a nation to manage water in an ineffective, inefficient or cumbersome way". The importance of water to the local economy can never be underestimated. A Victorian Department of Natural Resources study found that every 1000 megalitres of irrigation water used in horticulture generates 30 on-farm and support jobs.

We are the smallest continent, the largest island and probably the driest piece of real estate on the planet. We shouldn't be blaming operators for the present state of the problem; rather we should be pro active and innovative in looking at ways of ensuring future water supplies and sustainability. What has happened in the past is certainly *water under the bridge*.

It is important to remember- "*Fresh water is a PRECIOUS resource. Only 2.5% of the world's water is not salty, and of that, two thirds is locked in icecaps and glaciers. Of the remaining amount...20% is in areas too remote for human access and of the remaining 80%, about 75% comes at the wrong time and place - in monsoons and floods - and is not captured for use by people. The remainder is less than 0.08 of the 1% of the total water on the planet. It is precious indeed.*" World water Commission 2000.

1) **The future of water supplies in Australia** The future of water supplies in Australia is a **NATIONAL CONCERN**. Unless the issues of water availability, allocation and flows are tackled **NATIONALLY**, as in the past, it will continue to be an unresolved problem. We can no longer afford to have a state-by-state approach to what is a **NATIONAL PROBLEM**. (The River Murray Commission was, to all intents and purposes, a classic example of Tri State inertia and inaction of competing states interests.)

2) **Federal Ministry**. The first order of business should be the Federal Government Legislating to take over all riparian and water rights (including rainfall, runoff and artesian) within Australia. *Each state, by it's own admission, has over allocated the majority of allocated flows within its jurisdiction* Yes the states will get excited but the status quo is proof that the solutions are beyond them. Water should be a stand-alone ministry with its own minister. It's that important!

3) **The Ministry** should start out with a clean sheet

- Take over responsibility for all statutory and local water authorities
- Take over all rights and allocations
- Take over all storages
- Take over all recycling

INQUIRY INTO FUTURE WATER SUPPLIES FOR AUSTRALIA'S RURAL INDUSTRIES AND COMMUNITIES

- Take over all licensing
 - Collect all fees and levees
 - Set charges to reflect a more realistic cost recovery
 - Take over all monitoring functions
 - Take over all salinity monitoring
 - Take over and monitor all land clearing activities.
- 4) 4) **Sewerage.** In Australia at present various state and local government authorities pump millions of litres of water out to sea every day through outfalls. As a country with very finite resources of water, we just cannot afford the luxury of this wastage. We have to look at secondary and tertiary treatment and then pumping the water over the great divide.
- 5) 5) **Turning the Rivers around.** Something that has been spoken about for years. Dr Bradfield proposed that this should happen back in the '30's but it was dismissed as fanciful. Fanciful or not, it is another idea that should be given serious consideration and review.
- 6) 6) **Land Clearing and Salinity.** Land clearing and salinity make up an integral part of the equation. There is a direct causal link between land clearing and quality of ground water.
- 6) 7) **Costs.** We certainly can't afford to address all these problems on a state-by-state basis. We may not be able to afford it on a national basis. The alternative is that we CANNOT afford not to do anything.

1) **The future of water supplies in Australia** At present in Australia, water usage, distribution, allocation, licensing *et. al* is handled by the states, with the states interests being paramount. While the River Murray Commission (RMC) was set up as a tri state authority to monitor the quality of water flow down the Murray into South Australia, unfortunately the quality of water reaching South Australia has declined and the RMC lacks any real credibility. The level of salt being carried in the system is increasing and the land degradation along the flood plain is becoming terminal. Even within states there are competing interest groups pushing their own concerns. All are very important in relation to their contribution to the local economy and to the national accounts. In NSW there a number of high profile user groups each with a very valid claim to the states resources. e.g. Namoi Valley Cotton growers, Darling River Cotton Growers, Lake Tandau, In Queensland there have been a very high profile debate on the future of Cubbie Station. While each area is conscious of its immediate impact and surrounds they are still competing within a state basis. The states in turn are competing on a national basis and the result is what we have today. Local authorities are also competing for finite resources. We are seeing now that Sydney and Melbourne and the Gold Coast have to look very seriously at their infrastructure and on going supplies. The population growth and demand is now starting to put considerable pressure on supplies. Interesting to note that in Brisbane, within the space of 12 months the Lord mayor has changed his thinking on the use of domestic water tanks, to collect roof run off. Such is the stranglehold that the environmental lobby has on public thinking, that there are no new metropolitan water storages being seriously planned or committed to in the foreseeable future.

2) **Federal Ministry.** Given this backdrop of competing interests and priorities, it is of paramount importance that the Federal Government legislates to take over

responsibility for ALL water rights, allocation and distribution within Australia. This would include river flows, underground, surface water, runoff, and recycling. *Each state, by its own admission, has over allocated the majority of allocated flows within its jurisdiction.* By having one responsible authority for water ion Australia that is national, not parochial in outlook, we would have a much better handle on what is arguably one of the most important resources that this country has. We may not be able to influence *El Ninos* or other weather patterns within this land but we can do a much better job of managing what we have and putting it to the best use.

3) **The Ministry.** The ministry should start out with a clean sheet. Just as we have a Dept of Defence, and an Attorney General's Dept and Foreign Affairs and Trade, so we should have a Dept of Water Resources. It is that important!

- Take over responsibility for all statutory and local water authorities
- Take over all rights and allocations
- Take over all storages
- Take over all recycling
- Take over all licensing
- Collect all fees and levees
- Set charges to reflect a more realistic cost recovery
- Take over all monitoring functions
- Take over all salinity monitoring
- Take over and monitor all land clearing activities.

4) **Sewerage.** It is absolutely staggering to think of a country as dry as Australia pumping millions of litres of water out to sea each day. Whether it is treated or not, it is still an incredible waste of a very finite resource. The country as a whole has to address this problem of incredible waste. Over the years there have been some very good attempts to do something about it, and some of the schemes in place are showing promise however I believe that there is still a lack of political will to tackle the hard questions. It is very easy to pump waste out to sea. I believe that there has to be a serious commitment to looking at ways of treating out waste and pumping it inland rather than out to sea. For all intents and purposes, the ground water in the Lockyer Valley (Brisbane) has been exhausted and yet Brisbane still relies on the area as its salad bowl. Why shouldn't all the Brisbane sewage be treated and sent west to be recycled?

5) **Turning the Rivers around.** Has been talked about for years yet, like sewerage has always wound up in the too hard or too expensive basket. We live on the best farming country (the costal Plain) and farm very marginal country. As we not going to move, serious consideration should be given to turning some of our rivers around. We proved with the Snowy and the Burdekin (Qld) that we have the expertise. Do we have the political will?

6) **Land Clearing and Salinity.** Major problems that go hand in hand. For far too long in this country we took a shortsighted "Clear Fell" approach to land clearing and now we are paying the price in massive land degradation and rising salt. One only has to look at Western Australia or the rising Salinity in the Murray River system to see the results of our mismanagement. Even in our urban environment we are seeing rising water tables as a result of clearing out the native stock of big eucalypts with their deep root system and the replacement of shallow rooted stock which may look pleasing but is doing nothing to prevent a rising water table with its attendant salinity problems.

7) Costs. We **CANNOT** afford to sit by and do nothing. We say that we don't have the resources to tackle some of these problems however the cost of doing nothing is far higher. We have to make a start. The money is not nearly as important as the political will. The political will has to be here and now, not an endless round of ministerial councils and committees and sub committees and further inquiries that go around and around and yet never achieve anything of substance. Contrary to popular opinion, **WATER IS A FINITE RESOURCE**. This is clearly recognised by Don Murray CEO of the Murray Darling Basin Commission who stated in July 2002 that an interstate water trading trial had been declared a monumental success. " It has fundamentally allowed water which could be traded to go to its highest value use." Mr Blackmore said that " water trading would be important in the future, not just to facilitate the development of high value agriculture, but to enable people to adjust as environmental-flow rules change." However Mr Blackmore also recognised that there were still problems with the states having different licence systems and security of supply. There needed to be transparency and an agreed set of administrative and environmental clearance provisions. The importance of water to the local economy can never be underestimated. A Victorian Department of Natural Resources study found that every 1000 megalitres of irrigation water used in horticulture generates 30 on-farm and support jobs.

{The Author. I have been indirectly involved with Water most of my life. Growing up we "lived and breathed water "and all the politics associated with it. My father was the principal construction engineer for the NSW Water Resources and Irrigation Commission (WC&IC) and my Grandfather was on the board of the Sydney Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board. As children we were privileged to see the "workings" of all the Sydney Storage dams and would spend time at these facilities each year. Before my father was posted to Sydney, we all lived on site at Burrinjuck Dam via Yass where my father was the then resident Engineer. Until my father's retirement I was fortunate enough to be able to visit most of the storage facilities within NSW controlled by the WC&IC. I was involved directly in irrigation on the Darling River at Bourke (Cotton, Vegetables, cereals and stock) as well as indirectly around Lake Cargelligo, where I was involved in farm machinery) From this background I still have an abiding interest in water and its application.}