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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES  
AND FORESTRY

SUBMISSION NO 60

**Landholders for the environment**

**for sustainable production, for sustainable conservation, and defending landholders rights**

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Web site <http://landholders.tripod.com> **News & Views archives**

**Submission to the Inquiry into Future Water Supplies For  
Australia's Rural Industries & Communities**

The following submission is directly answering the "Terms of Reference" of the inquiry  
The views I am expressing are those of the supporting landholders in our email group which  
number in excess of 250.

Leon Ashby,  
3 Hay Tee Kongorong SA 5291,  
Dairyfarmer & Grazier, 1999 Qld landcare award finalist,  
Convenor of "Landholders for the environment".

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**(1) The "role of the commonwealth" in ensuring adequate & sustainable supply of water in  
rural & regional Australia**

As many people realise, Landholders need water to be productive in managing their farming enterprises, and to keep the land in good shape. In short, we are all wanting a consistent, and secure access to water to be able to continue to manage and invest in our properties. In ensuring adequate & sustainable supplies of water, our members see the Commonwealth's role as arbitrator, rather than policy-maker on water supply issues.

We realise that under the Australian constitution the states have the primary responsibility for resource management and we are satisfied with that.

But this of course raises the question of addressing water issues consistently across borders.

**Holistic decision making**

The only way to address these concerns is with cooperative decision making systems - in other words a single body, fairly made up of financial and other genuine stakeholders residing in the catchment in question. Others may provide technical and scientific advice, but should not be able to subvert the democratic process.

These decision making groups need to be able to communicate freely and find "win - win" solutions looking at the community "as a whole" (environmentally, socially, economically, & motivationally etc )

In our view, **convened email discussions** or **convened television and email / fax / phone discussions** would be satisfactory.

Since democratic governments are governments of the people, we believe the Commonwealth's role ought to be to **assist the "grass roots people" that are affected** in finding solutions, rather than governments deciding solutions for themselves and then trying to manipulate the grass roots people into accepting these ideas.

(Qld's premier Peter Beattie recently tried this second approach with Cubbie station).

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**(2) "Commonwealth policies & programs", in rural & regional Australia that could underpin stability of storage & supply of water for domestic consumption and other purposes**

We see there are a number of issues that commonwealth policies & programs can address such as.

- (1) Water use efficiency improvement
- (2) Water quality improvement
- (3) Water supply improvement
- (4) Ensuring research data is sufficient and unbiased enough for fair decisions to be made
- (5) Determining the nature and extent of the pre 1750 water flows as the basis for distinguishing between as-of-right water entitlements and tradeable entitlements.

As far as "stability of storage & supply" goes, while dams, weirs, and underground aquifers are the main water storages in rural Australia, there is now a new idea with water storage - the opportunity to store (mostly excess surface water) underground in between layers of impervious rock & clays (which can eliminate any evaporation losses during storage).

Whatever situations serve each farm / catchment / community's situation the best, we believe there needs to be decent incentives given to assist any of these groups because human endeavour responds much better with fair incentives than with repressive imposts.

So along with holistic community decision making, we believe a variety of incentive mechanisms could be looked at to improve research data, storage, supply and quality of water.

Some communities (i.e. catchments, towns, & farms) may decide to harness water from a variety of places including

- \* a portion of certain river's flow,
- \* water from a deeper aquifer,
- \* recycling waste water,
- \* a portion of excess runoff (overland flow) being stored, or
- \* desalinisation of nearby salty water
- \* restoring open woodland water balances through thinning of thickened forest on both public and private land.

but whichever way, there should be

- (a) solid research to assist with the decision making and
- (b) similar incentive arrangements for each community's decision.

The incentives can be given in various ways such as paying for achieved outcomes (efficiency improvements), competitive grants, tax deductions / tax credits, & dollar for dollar funding, etc

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**(3) The effect of Commonwealth Policies & programs on current & future water use in rural Australia**

The Commonwealth, & the States have up to now been struggling to address water issues on behalf of the community effectively because

- (a) Landholders who have lost their "Water property rights" are not being fairly dealt with / compensated.
- (b) There is insufficient solid data upon which base decision-making.
- (c) There is a confused attitude about how to approach "environmental flows" (water for the environment)

Quickly elaborating on these points

(a) If "water property rights" were fairly compensated when removed, then decisions which threaten to decimate livelihoods (and communities) would (in theory) not happen. This would encourage and assist better community decisions and cooperation from stakeholders.

(b) Insufficient Research - example (i). Up to now, both state & Federal Govts have assumed that

the water in the Great Artesian Basin (GAB) is replenished by a recharge area - yet no conclusive evidence for this exists.

Landholders who live in the "supposed recharge area" have to drill through impervious layers (rock with clay) to get to GAB water which rises after the impervious layer has been drilled through. Now if there really was recharge in this area water would not be under impervious layers or rise when the bore reaches the water. As you can see the theory says one thing - the reality is another, yet there is legislation (Cooper Creek Water Management Plan 2000) that defines the recharge area, despite no conclusive data.

Example (ii) Water being licensed from aquifers in many states does not appear to be based on a fully understood scientific basis

e.g. The amount of water used by trees appears to be insufficiently researched. e.g. While CSIRO research shows some (17%) of rainfall can still enter an aquifer under SA forests, other research shows trees still use water from aquifers as well. It appears that the "whole" picture is still unexplained (or perhaps not understood)

This means that while the SA govt claims it will not have to license forest owners and charge for any underground water forests use (rainfall tax), it appears that as further research comes in, plantations and poorly managed native forests will in fact be deemed as underground water users (above the levels used by the pre-1750 vegetation under firestick farming) and the rules will change again.

In this case, research needs to be done to determine how much water forests can get from an aquifer after rainfall has gone past its root system (that is the roots which are not reaching the aquifer). This would need to be assessed with regard to whether areas of fully cleared land on the same holding or catchment off-set these flows. Anything less allows uncertainty to continue.

There are many other examples of insufficient research on water issues involving salinity, drainage, quality and infiltration issues as well

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(c) Environmental flow definition - There is no research on how much "environmental flow" is the minimum required for sustaining any river ecosystem, or what the definition of a healthy river system is.

While much is made about Australia's unhealthy river systems, there is ample anecdotal evidence which challenges the idea that catchment systems were ever in a state of perfection pre settlement. The explorer Sturt's journal records that when he reached the Darling in 1828 the river was very low and the water too salty to water his horses.

"Landholders for the environment" has received a variety of anecdotal evidence from a number of landholders and descendants of early settlers, supporting the view that in the very early years of settlement, there were

- \* Algal blooms in Australia's inland rivers.
- \* Areas of dryland salinity were in existence and,
- \* Qld Aborigines even had their own words for "break aways" - (places of severe erosion),

These bits of evidence are not widely known, but give a picture of Australia always having fluctuating water quality. We would like to see a forum be convened for this sort of information to be presented to the public because it gives a more truthful idea of Australia's landscape and rivers.

We also believe "the whole community" has to be involved in deciding a definition of a healthy river system AND a definition for how much water needs to flow down a river. For example, is an environmental flow something like 20 % of the water flow, or is it ...X,000 megalitres. The differing definition does have serious consequences to rural Australia because an inexact amount e.g. 20% environmental flow is often fairer to landholders and towns. (i.e. during a drought, the environment shares the pain).

I would also argue that the Australian public needs to assess water use for conservation (the environment) in the same terms as water use for production - eg. how many ,000 litres of water is required to sustain a dingo, a kangaroo, or a koala and how much water is required to sustain all of our wildlife for the benefit of the public

This is so a realistic and full picture about water uses can be better understood.

Australian landholders are entitled to much more hard evidence being used in the determination of water issues in Australia.

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**(4) Commonwealth policies & programs that could address & balance the competing demands on water resources**

Our suggestions for policies & programs are based on three principles

**(1) Recognition that urban water use that is generally described as the "highest and best use" is, in fact, the least efficient and most wasteful.**

Even during a severe drought, urban grey water still goes into a drain while fresh water is "rationed" for garden maintenance. No urban user has any obligation to use (let alone re-use) any of the water that falls on their property yet their water "needs" are always at the head of the queue. **Environmental flows should be sourced from the least efficient users first.**

**(2) Decision making that is Flat (non heirarchial) and very grass roots based.** The more policy and program decisions that come from "everyone getting an opportunity to discuss things" , the better policies & programs will result, because the "competing demands" will get an opportunity to thrash the situation out in a constructive way.

**(3) Giving incentives to communities / individuals for achieved outcomes**

Once some decisions are made by a flat decision making process, then incentive arrangements can be drawn up. Here are two suggestions

**(i) To get water trading occuring more readily**

A scheme where 10% of the traded price of water could be refunded for the first 12 months could be a possible incentive scheme

**(ii) To produce desalinised water for the minimal cost**

Offer a reward (\$1 million) for any person / group that can desalinise water using 10% LESS ENERGY PER LITRE OF WATER PRODUCED than the current best method

**We believe the philosophy of governments should be to reward outcomes for the goals set by the community.**

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**(5) The adequacy of scientific research on the approaches required for adaption to climate variability And better weather prediction, including the reliability of forcasting systems and capacity to provide specialist forecasts.**

While landholders do want better weather forecasts, we realise forecasts only provide an assessment of rainfall probability. This is far from giving predictions of exact rainfall events and therefore a guide about exactly what farmers should do.

In our view, the whole issue of "the variability of the Australian climate / drought preparation" should really be "How to find more water for landmanagers to use all year round" because the best climate variability preparedness is to have a water supply just for the times of low rainfall

There are a number of options the Federal Govt could initiate incentives for.

- \* Recycling water for many uses.
- \* Diverting some (but not all) of the water from various Northern Australia River's into the inland
- \* maximising the dry season extraction of soils, sands, gravels and roadbase materials from the shallow margins of water storages to reduce loss through evaporation.
- \* ensuring that publicly owned native regrowth forest does not fall into a high water usage "locked up" or "thickened" state through neglect of thinning activity, and
- \* finding markets (woodchip or preferably local processing) for the above mentioned public and private native forest thinnings (estimated at 90 million tonnes/pa, Burrows).
- \* Pumping fresh water from the mouth of Drains, creeks, & rivers back inland
- \* Using Seawater for various industries (aquaculture)
- \* Desalinisation of seawater

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Summary  
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Though the control of water resources currently rests with the States of Australia, the Commonwealth should play an active role in bring the community together to discuss water issues.

One of the most important issues is to allow the affected stakeholders to decide for themselves their response to their challenges.

We suggest a flat decision making process with a catchment wide interactive forum

The Commonwealth can assist in solving water issues by having programs with incentives built into them

The major issue for Australia will be "to find more water with minimal adverse effects" and to store water more efficiently - there are many ways to do this including

- \* Recycling water for many uses.
- \* Diverting some (but not all) of the water from various Northern River's into Australia's inland
- \* maximising the dry season extraction of soils, sands, gravels and roadbase materials from the shallow margins of water storages to reduce loss through evaporation.
- \* ensuring that publicly owned native regrowth forest does not fall into a high water usage "locked up" or "thickened" state through neglect of thinning activity, and
- \* finding markets (woodchip or preferably local processing) for the above mentioned public and private native forest thinnings (estimated at 90 million tonnes/pa, Burrows).
- \* obtain environmental flows from the sectors most capable of providing them, ie improved efficiency (not tokenism) of urban water usage.
- \* Pumping fresh water from the mouth of Drains, creeks, & rivers back inland (recycling)
- \* Using Seawater for various industries (aquaculture)
- \* Desalinisation of seawater
- \* Finding deeper underground aquifers
- \* Storing water underground

But the big issue for Australia is to find more water to consistently supply our vast land in ways that improve our landscape.

To simply say that the current water supplies we have are all there is, is to put our heads in the sand and ignore the needs of the world which is demanding more food & fibre.

Two things are vital for sustaining life - one is energy flow (the carbon cycle), the other is water. We believe the commonwealth govt therefore **MUST** work with its people in providing **more water to more of the landscape** to achieve a balance between productive capacity and conservation whilst protecting the rights of the landholders who are charged with the responsibility of managing the land.

Yours Sincerely,

Leon & Jane Ashby (SA),

Ian Mott (Qld & NSW),  
Richard & Judi Makim (Qld),  
Judith McGeorge (Qld),  
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