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SUBMISSION NO 35

The Committee Secretary,
Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

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The Toowoomba and Region Environment Council wishes to make the following comments to the House of Representatives inquiry into future water supplies for Australia's rural industries and communities.

1. The role of the Commonwealth in ensuring adequate and sustainable supply of water in rural and regional Australia.


The Commonwealth must

- Provide the consistent policy / framework necessary to underpin ecological sustainability. With regard to the natural capital associated with water resources this includes:
 - guaranteeing wetland and floodplain flows;
 - maximising efficient use of the resource;
 - providing a framework for funding stewardship / ecosystem service payments to landholders providing such services over and above 'duty of care' responsibilities..
- Require all states to make annual budget allocation for on-going maintenance of natural assets including investment in river, wetland and floodplain ecosystems.
- Ensure independent auditing and compliance of water management/operation agencies and their accounting systems.

2. Commonwealth policies and programs, in rural and regional Australia that could underpin stability of storage and supply of water for domestic consumption and other purposes.

The Commonwealth must

- Encourage greater awareness of the availability of water in Australia and adopt policies that encourage all users to live within the limits of the resource, to be as self-reliant as possible and to use water responsibly.
- Require local governments to set mandatory standards for water conservation and efficiency in local building codes. This should include compulsory rainwater tanks and compulsory dry toilet systems.

Secretary: 
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- Facilitate education and awareness programs on all aspects of the water cycle and the limitations inherent in the Australian context. Particular emphasis and accurate information is required on re-use and recycling strategies if there is to be community acceptance of and support for the adoption of these techniques.
- Contribute to the costs of capping and piping all bores in GAB
- Regard water use efficiency as a legitimate development option and provide funding for implementation. Ensure efficiency gains are returned to the environment.
- Prohibit the construction of new in-stream water storages and facilitate the removal of redundant structures and modification of those structures threatening native species
- Categorically reject privatisation and foreign ownership and control of water and other ecosystem services.
- Areas critical to the control of saline groundwater must be identified and management proscribed, based on the best available science. (Similar requirement for intake areas)
- Restore wetlands for water purification and groundwater recharge benefits
- Strategic protection of vegetation to moderate climate effects

3. The effect of Commonwealth policies and programs on current and future water use in rural Australia.

The COAG Water Reform process was more about financial efficiency than ecological sustainability. TREC's view is that the reforms have failed to deliver the environmental objectives of the water reform process because of assumptions that:

- The demand for water will decrease as the price increases;
- Higher value uses of water are environmentally neutral
- Higher pricing plus tradable rights will lead to inefficient (environmentally damaging) users exiting the industry.

This has not proved to be the case. The demand for water has not decreased as prices have increased; higher value uses of water are not necessarily neutral; trading has resulted in fewer, larger players in the water industry.

TREC believes that the water reforms have generated uncertainty and anger in rural communities, due to the perceived unfairness of the reforms. Existing water markets must be restructured to make environmental sustainability the goal, and the market must be a servant to this end. This will require a real commitment to action from the States, the irrigation industry and the wider community.

4. Commonwealth policies and programs that could address and balance the competing demands on water resources.

The Commonwealth should take responsibility for the overarching policy framework for water resources in Australia. A catchment-based approach to water (and other natural resources) management is sorely needed to remove the institutional impediments and conflicting state priorities to sustainable water use.

5. The adequacy of scientific research on the approaches required for adaptation to climate variability and better weather prediction, including the reliability of forecasting systems and capacity to provide specialist forecasts.

- Australia is deeply affected by the ENSO effect, an event that is likely to have greater impacts as climate change becomes more apparent. TREC believes there is an urgent need for research into the role of vegetation in regional water cycles, and where such roles are identified, policies to protect such areas and manage them for their water production roles should be implemented.
- Research is needed into farming systems that are inherently more diverse, resilient, flexible and/or adaptable to climate variability. This should include more native species than is currently the case. Indigenous knowledge could be critical to the development of such systems. We are not aware of any research into how indigenous land management patterns reflect climate variability, nor social structures to ensure social sustainability in the face of this variability.
- Australia should ratify the Kyoto Protocol and take immediate action to reduce CO2 emissions and accelerate the growth and adoption of renewable energy technologies.
- The role of social capital in achieving environmentally and economically sustainable outcomes must also be investigated.

Yours Sincerely


Trevor Acfield - Coordinator