



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## Official Committee Hansard

# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND  
FORESTRY

**Reference: Future water supplies for Australia's rural industries and communities**

WEDNESDAY, 19 MARCH 2003

CANBERRA

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY**

**Wednesday, 19 March 2003**

**Members:** Mrs Elson (*Chair*), Mr Adams (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Forrest, Mrs Gash, Mrs Ley, Mr Schultz, Mr Secker, Mr Sidebottom, Mr Windsor and Mr Zahra

**Members in attendance:** (Mr Adams, Mrs Elson, Mr Forrest, Mr Schultz, Mr Secker, Mr Sidebottom and Mr Windsor)

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

The provision of future water supplies for Australia's rural industries and communities, particularly:

- The role of the Commonwealth in ensuring adequate and sustainable supply of water in rural and regional Australia.
- 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 effect of Commonwealth policies and programs on current and future water use in rural Australia.
- Commonwealth policies and programs that could address and balance the competing demands on water resources.
- 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.

**WITNESSES**

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**Committee met at 5.03 p.m.****ASHBY, Mr Leon Neville, Convenor and Founder, Landholders for the Environment**

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry inquiry into future water supplies for Australia's rural industries and communities. The committee will receive evidence from Landholders for the Environment. The hearing will involve the use of an audio link-up. Members are present in Canberra and the witness is giving evidence by phone link-up. I call the representative of Landholders for the Environment. Would you like to make some comments on the capacity in which you appear?

**Mr Ashby**—I also appear as a dairy farmer and grazier.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequentially they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that the giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. That put aside, you may, if you wish, make a brief statement in relation to your submission and then I will introduce you to members of the committee.

**Mr Ashby**—My brief statement is that we are a group that is Australia wide. We come from various farming backgrounds, predominantly major extensive farming backgrounds but there are a few from more intensive areas as well. That is basically where our views come from.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. We all have your submission here, which is very substantial. I am quite sure we have all read through it. We have not got the full list of the members here this afternoon but I would like to introduce those who are with us. I would also like to add that they are either farmers or representing farming areas. I will ask our member from South Australia to introduce himself first.

**Mr SECKER**—Hello, Leon.

**Mr Ashby**—How is it going, Patrick?

**Mr SECKER**—Good. And you?

**Mr Ashby**—Not too bad, mate.

**Mr FORREST**—I am from across the border. I am the member for Mallee.

**Mr Ashby**—Glad to meet you, John.

**Mr ADAMS**—I represent the seat of Lyons in Tasmania. It is 60 per cent of the island's landmass.

**Mr Ashby**—Thank you very much, Dick.

**Mr WINDSOR**—I am the member for New England, which is in northern New South Wales. There are a number of dams there that may or may not impact upon your lifestyle downstream. I am pleased to have you here.

**Mr Ashby**—Likewise. Nice to meet you, Tony.

**Mr SCHULTZ**—I am the federal member for Hume. I am very pleased to catch up with you.

**Mr Ashby**—Likewise, Alby. Thank you.

**CHAIR**—I am Kay Elson, the chair of the committee. I represent a rural and suburban area in south-east Queensland. That is all of our committee who are present at the moment. Other members will wander in as the afternoon unfolds. Are there any questions to start?

**Mr SECKER**—I am wondering about your organisation. Is it actually a formal body with a constitution or is it more just a gathering or group of people who have got together?

**Mr Ashby**—It started from some property rights protest meetings that we had in Queensland a few years ago that I was leading. The group of us started discussing things on email and then that grew and it went interstate and across Australia. It mainly grew because of the inquiry into public good conservation. You were involved with that, as well. Once that inquiry went around there was a lot of us who made contact afterwards who had made submissions. We got together and formed a group to try and find out what we could agree on in the way of sustainable production, sustainable conservation and land-holders' rights. We are now in the process of becoming incorporated because we feel that the group has got its act together enough with its web site and discussions that we have regularly on email with various people across Australia, including conservationists and green groups and politicians and people in bureaucracy. We feel that we have a position that is pretty unique and we would like to initiate things like research and publicising that research from a grassroots perspective. We want to work in with scientists and others in things like natural resource management, water and other issues that affect land-holders.

**Mr SECKER**—Are you trying to get more of a say by the actual land-holders themselves through your process?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes. The landowners generally leave it up to their representatives, which are usually major lobby groups which unfortunately end up with people who are not land-holders very often holding the positions and doing the talking. We would like the actual grassroots people themselves to be able to make their point come across. Quite often you are living in a situation—for example, as I am with water with irrigation and that—where decisions are being made and the full effect of it is not communicated very easily. I might go to a meeting, put my hand up and explain to the meeting what is going on and how it is affecting me; but, when they go to the next level and you have all these hierarchical things happening, by the time it gets to the top of SAFF or the National Farmers Federation or things like that, my message is diluted down to nothing.

**Mr SECKER**—Yes.

**Mr Ashby**—We find that is a big concern, because those issues may only be minor issues in one sense but they affect us in a big way. It can be just the way that things are brought in and be an issue affecting just our area—there may be only 10 dairy farmers affected—but it is big for us. It is little in the overall context but it still should be listened to.

**Mr SECKER**—It might be useful for the rest of the committee to know a bit more about your issues, because in your situation we are dealing more with underground water than a river, aren't we?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes; in the bottom of South Australia we certainly are. I also had a property in Central Queensland where run-off was the major issue and that was also where the Great Artesian Basin was. I probably have as good a handle as most people on the various issues so I can speak on all of them quite well. And I was involved with the Cooper Creek Catchment Committee and setting up the group in the Lake Eyre Basin project. There were a lot of contentious issues there and we found the same thing was happening, which was why Landholders for the Environment was formed. The land-holders would go to the meetings and quite often people in the group were from semi-bureaucratic backgrounds and they would write up submissions about what we had said at the meetings. But by the time it came back to us what we had said had been twisted around to mean something different.

**Mr SECKER**—How do you see the three levels of government dealing with these issues?

**Mr Ashby**—Sometimes we feel as if we definitely get more support from the Commonwealth than from the states. The states seem to want to manipulate us in a certain direction. The Commonwealth seems to have more of an overriding view and tries to get balance and fairness for everybody. The Commonwealth is quite often considerably closer to our view than are the state governments.

The local government is caught in the crossfire in trying to get an outcome for two or three different areas. For example, some of the underground water in the northern part of the lower south-east area is affected by salinity, but in the southern part it is not. There are different issues and the local governments find themselves in a bit of a tangled web in terms of sorting something out equitably. Generally, they are more on the ball and closer to the mark than is the Commonwealth government, but quite often it is very messy.

**CHAIR**—Another committee member, Mr Sid Sidebottom from north-west Tasmania, has just joined us.

**Mr SIDEBOTTOM**—I am sorry I was late, Leon, but it is good to be with you.

**Mr Ashby**—I am glad to meet you.

**CHAIR**—Have you, or any of your land-holders, worked with Landcare, or any other group, and had any success?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes. I was secretary of the Aramac Landcare Group in Central Queensland for about three years. I initiated a water-spreading project, which came out under the Drought Landcare Project, the DLP; it was not through NHT. I was involved in piloting a research project. About \$150,000 worth of government funds went into it; it was worth \$300,000 all up,

with the land-holder contribution. That project was very successful. The people from Canberra came out and saw it on our properties. We did it across eight properties.

It involved slowing water down so that, instead of having a lot of run-off, a lot of erosion and losing all the water after a big rainstorm, we put banks up and we put sticks across our gullies to move the water sideways. We moved it backwards and forwards. In one case I moved it five kilometres in one direction and then five kilometres back in the other direction and it had only moved downstream about six inches. In doing that the water soaked into the ground and was kept there. There was still run-off in the big events but during the smaller storms—of about a couple of inches—the water was kept where it was wanted and it did not just run straight down the creek and get lost.

That project was very successful. The departments were very impressed with it. A lot of people were very sceptical when we first put it in. I was nominated for a research award and was one of the finalists in the Queensland Landcare Research Awards.

**CHAIR**—Congratulations!

**Mr Ashby**—Probably about a third of our members are involved in Landcare groups or have been to some degree.

**CHAIR**—I am only going by experience in my electorate—the Landcare work is excellent, and the farmers do work very closely with them to stop erosion damage. But the farmers also tell me that the cost is a bit hard for them to bear sometimes. I noticed that in your submission you say that government policy should be based on incentives. Do you find that the cost to the farmer is a disincentive to cooperate with Landcare, or do you find that your members do not mind having to contribute to fix up the damage?

**Mr Ashby**—There are two parts to this. If you just have to fork out for, let us say, the water-spreading project I was looking at, there was no way that we could have afforded that on our own because we had been through several years of drought and low commodity prices. Also, I was in the middle of a wool bust that was 10 years in the making. I was in about the seventh year, and we had absolutely no dollars left to do anything. But, because it was a good project, it got up. I think there are two things. If we were to get reasonable prices for our produce—and I think most people would say that we are really only getting the cost of production a lot of the time—and if we were to receive rewards for looking after the land, that would mean that we would then have the extra money to put back into other things, like looking after our water run-off and whatever else.

So, if the prices we received were better, we would have more money and it would not be a problem. If we are not going to get that and are only ever going to get the cost of production—which is more or less what supply and demand ends up giving us—that is where the incentives need to come in. Instead of the community paying extra money for their food, they should pay incentives or rewards to people doing good work—whichever way you want to do it. You could either pay it up-front as a carrot or give it as a reward later on for having achieved it. That is our basic view.



**Mr FORREST**—In Victoria—on my side of the border—there are now some functioning catchment management authorities, which are state based and appointed agencies with community people involved at the grassroots. Does that happen in South Australia?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes and no. It is different in different parts of the state. Where I am, at the bottom of South Australia, the Landcare movement is not, let us say, as grassroots organised as it is in some of the middle of New South Wales and some of Queensland. Here it is a bit more organised by bureaucracy. You go along to it if you want to. Probably only about 10 per cent of people are involved in it to some degree down here, whereas, where I was in Queensland, 90 per cent of the community were members of the Landcare group. The reason was that it was virtually grassroots controlled. It started out with a couple of departmental blokes wanting to organise it, and they had their ideas. Then they ran out of the ability to do much, so the local people said, ‘If we’re going to do anything good, let’s do it ourselves.’ And we did. That is why it took off as far as involvement went. It is a total mixed bag wherever I go. I find that one a bit hard to answer.

**Mr FORREST**—Your submission is a little bit critical of the lack of community participation. There is not a bad model in Victoria; I imagine that, in South Australia, it is more difficult to define catchments. But these are community people. They are appointed—a bit like hospital board members. They have a process of accountability and reporting to their state minister. I am testing you as to whether that is one way to solve your questions about the need for community input into the decision-making process. You seem to be pretty strong on that.

**Mr Ashby**—I am getting what you are getting at. The model we prefer is the holistic decision-making model. I will give you a story. The Cooper Creek catchment group that I was involved in appointed 12 people across the catchment, which was 1,000 kilometres in length and several hundred kilometres wide. They would meet and make decisions. The northern part of the catchment was very much into using water for whatever purpose it could. The bottom part of the catchment was saying, ‘No, we want all the water to come down the creek so it floods Cooper Creek flood plains. So there was this big row going on.

We wanted to see all the community involved in understanding each other’s point of view, but we had people at one end who would not go and visit other people’s properties and have a look. They just wanted to have their argument and leave it at that and hope that no-one was going to get it solved. We were looking for a win-win solution. The best way we could do that was by the community people getting out on each other’s properties and/or in discussion so that they understood the full story without it just being people digging their ditches and firing bullets across it, virtually. So our holistic decision-making model is one where all the people are able to in some way listen to what is being said and ask questions of each other. We see that technology as the way to do that. Appointing people like 12 representatives across catchments, or whatever it is, is a bit like the government situation. We vote for you guys and in you go and try to represent 30,000 people—

**Mr FORREST**—It is three times that.

**Mr Ashby**—Whatever it is. It is pretty tough going. How do you get the balance right? I convened a meeting of 600 land-holders with Peter Beattie and it went for three hours. We were discussing vegetation management. He got some questions that he would not get on the floor of parliament. The land-holders got to ask some questions that the opposition would never get to

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ask him because they did not understand the issues to the same degree. We see that tool as a possibility now and we would like to see it developed.

I am also working with a group called BushVision, which is trying to get a television channel up for rural Australia. It is looking at developing those sorts of opportunities via interactive satellite TV, with emails and faxes and phones working at the same time so that we can hopefully start trialling those sorts of models. In some places it may not be necessary, but certainly in big catchments, with lots of people with different points of view, I think that is the only way we can get the community together. We have seen some big turnarounds in attitudes. We have had people discussing an issue face-to-face. They are going out onto one bloke's property and they are kicking the dirt with him and looking at the water and at the vegetation and saying, 'Oh, yes, I understand your situation.' Until the guys in the southern part of the Cooper Creek actually got onto a couple of places, they did not have a clue about things like tree thickening or water run-off or the things that the blokes in the north were talking about. They had never seen it. Even though they are in the same state, being 500 to 1,000 kilometres away, they never actually got on there until that opportunity came. We see that as a good thing.

**Mr FORREST**—On the same subject, in your submission you say:

We suggest a flat decision making process with a catchment wide interactive forum. This is to get affected stakeholders involved in the decision.

I am trying to find out from you what would satisfy you. You have not gone to the nub of it. Do you want the Commonwealth to form some sort of authority like that? That is pretty difficult, with the Constitution. What do you want?

**Mr Ashby**—In our view, we are going to provide the means for the satellite television model—whether or not it is grassroots controlled but with the support of government, which is what we are trying to look at with the BushVision concept. We want the Commonwealth government to be partners with us in it, so that meetings we have are recognised by the government as being the official view of the catchment. If the Commonwealth government sets it up, more likely than not it is going to be a bit top heavy. It is going to be run by people who are not grassroots. But, if it is run by people who are grassroots with the cooperation of the Commonwealth government—or state governments as well—they would be seen as the partners but not the full controllers of it. It would be seen more as a partnership, but the outcomes can be respected, acted upon, and seen as genuine and the correct ones to follow through.

You guys in government get mixed messages. You get one from us at grassroots, which we send to you in letters saying that this and that are wrong. Then you get one from the people who are organising the catchment groups, saying that everything is under control quite often. It is not, quite often. We know that anyway, from some of our experiences. So the only way we can really see it is as a partnership arrangement. That is why we are trying to work with something like the BushVision concept. Does that answer your question?

**Mr FORREST**—Yes.

**Mr WINDSOR**—I have two questions. One relates to property rights—a debate that is in all states, I guess. Seeing that this inquiry is about possibilities for the future in terms of the

Commonwealth's involvement in water issues, what role would you like to see the Commonwealth playing in relation to the issue of property rights?

**Mr Ashby**—I know where the COAG thing is at the moment. It is at a bit of a stalemate, with the state governments finding that they are going in one direction and our organisation having a different view. In brief, rather than taking property rights away from people and paying them compensation—which is what the states are tending to go towards—we would like to see a situation where, wherever possible, property rights are not taken away from people. If they are, they are paid for, but we would like to try to minimise that to every degree. If you are looking at something like conservation, we would like to see incentives put up for that conservation. We believe that would actually be cheaper in the long run than paying compensation anyway. So we would like to see a cooperative approach.

Quite often, when it comes to making decisions on property rights, the last people who are talked to are the landholders. It is usually bureaucrats like the ones who have written on the Land and Water Australia web site—there are eight different points of view there, and I do not think one of them is a land-holder's view. We disagree with much of what seven of those eight are saying because they do not quite understand it from our point of view. We think that property rights should be maintained as much as possible. Wherever they are taken away, yes, the government should buy the land, put on a different title and set of conditions, and then resell it. That would be the fairest way because—

**Mr WINDSOR**—Are you talking about the state government?

**Mr Ashby**—The state government would do that, yes. The Commonwealth government really has its hands tied because of the way the Constitution is, and we respect that. So we see it as something that really needs to be sorted out between land-holders and state governments, with the Commonwealth supporting it. We would prefer not to see any compensation necessarily having to be paid if we can find another way around it. We would prefer the cooperative model of incentives.

**Mr WINDSOR**—So, even though the COAG arrangements call for a definition of property rights, you would not see a role for the Commonwealth in terms of driving the agenda?

**Mr Ashby**—You would have to drive the agenda to get somewhere at the moment. We are hamstrung, too, as landholders. We have not got ourselves organised in such a way that we can actually do much with state government, so we see what the Commonwealth government is doing as very positive. We fully support the fact that John Anderson and company are trying to get the states to the position of defining property rights.

We would like to see the states come back and discuss it with the land-holders and get something that really works—in particular with grassroots land-holders because quite often when they are working with AgForce, New South Wales farmers or whoever, those guys go in there with a loaded agenda. Their model is one, and I know that AgForce and New South Wales farmers feel that they have got to do the second-best option rather than the best option. In the end, it is a bit of a mess.

**Mr WINDSOR**—My follow-up question is in a sense a bit of a wild card, so please do not answer it if you are not too interested in it. If there were a loss of an allocation for a justifiable

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reason and that loss impacted on an individual, and if the states were not interested in compensating that particular individual even though he is going to suffer pain, what do you think of the Commonwealth using taxation policy to have that loss, in terms of the operation of that business, written off? Have you ever looked at those sorts of things?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes, we have. Generally, unfortunately, they do not make much of a profit to actually write it off. That is the only thing: it works usually only for people who are making money—which is not all of them. You are probably looking at only a third of them being able to do that. From my experience, that is why it comes back to an individual situation. With the properties that I know of where they have lost their rights and have had it taken away, it would have been better for the land-holders to have negotiated something up front. Some of them have tried but could not get that, so it ended up in a bit of a brawl and in the courts. A lot of them are just waiting for a court case to come up before they put in their claim to try to join with their loss of rights too—that is across both vegetation and water.

**Mr ADAMS**—You mentioned genuine stakeholders residing in the catchment, and there are some big catchments in Australia. Have you got any idea of a model on how you would deal with that?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes. Basically, it happens quite often with some of the catchments in Queensland. For example, where I was in Central Queensland, people on the coast of Queensland, who have never been out there, were putting their oar in as far as being in the stakeholder group. What happened with the native vegetation situation in Queensland is that the Wildlife Preservation Society asked local people to represent them in those native vegetation groups, and that worked quite well. That was reasonably successful. I would say that in 99 per cent of cases that was very successful. They were good people. There was one case where the person who was a representative moved there from a long way away, did not really know the local issues and did not get on very well with the locals. But, generally speaking, because they are concerned locals and represent a variety of interests, they thrash out some reasonable solutions.

**Mr ADAMS**—On the issue of property rights that Tony was talking to you about, does your group believe that there is a link between property and water rights?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes. We are still discussing the various things because you cannot really separate them. We are trying to look at everything holistically—that is, you have got land and vegetation which is responsive to the rainfall and your rainfall and vegetation are always responsive to the amount that actually infiltrates. So if your soil caps and you are losing more water, you can have changes in your vegetation and all sorts of things. The whole thing needs to be approached holistically. We recognise that but we struggle with how to put that understanding across to people. That is why we are getting involved with a television channel. We want to do more research and put the images across to people that show the things that we see—the change on our land.

With property rights, if you are going to take one of those things away, or limit them in some way without negotiation or agreement, then people are going to be upset and there are going to be court cases later on down the track. We can see that happening more and more if property rights keep being pursued the way that they are. Some of our members have collected evidence and put it in safes for the day that there is a court case that sets a precedent where they can go

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and claim \$1 million off the government. They are working on that just quietly at the moment. I know of two people who are doing that. That is one thing we would rather not see happen. We think it is only going to end up another mess.

**Mr ADAMS**—With some of those properties, maybe with new farming techniques and sustainable farming, the changes could be made with some of the carrots that you talked about, but there probably will be some areas that we will not farm anymore.

**Mr Ashby**—I sort of agree. If you look at the whole landscape and ask what the goal is for that landscape, you might have some areas where you say, ‘This area has endangered species, it has got major conservation values; we should manage that as a community and the community should pay for it because it is public good conservation.’ With other areas you might say, ‘That has a potential for production. It is not valued to the same degree for conservation; therefore it has a value to land-holders and that is whatever the market price is.’ We have got to set that landscape goal and have the ability to discuss that as a community. That sort of gets back to our television thing again, where the community sees the land and understands that different landscapes have different values and goals. We want to be open and flexible in what we are suggesting and for the community to make that decision for each part of the landscape. We do not want to see too much hard and fast legislation; we want to see it as things that are market driven. In the end, governments have to provide the dollars if it is not market driven, and that is a tough one.

**Mr ADAMS**—Thank you.

**Mr SCHULTZ**—I am going to be the devil’s advocate to some degree in this. I agree with my parliamentary colleagues in terms of the direction that they have been going with regard to compensation, whether it is for property rights or water rights. We all know that we live in a huge, dry continent and that water is our most precious resource. Obviously, access to that resource has been allowed mainly because of political expediency rather than on a long-term sustainability basis. How can the community possibly address the issue of excess usage when the stakeholders within that same community have a vested economic interest in maintaining the status quo? That is the first question.

**Mr Ashby**—Yes, they are interested in the status quo but, with community groups that I have been involved in, if you bring the community together so that everyone can see all the issues, without having a situation where one person is going to get more out of it than another person, we have got past being suspicious of everybody else or thinking that someone is going to take more away from one person than anyone else. I have been part of vegetation groups where people have negotiated away 20 per cent more than what they would have expected when they walked in there, because everybody else took it fairly on the chin as well. I think that what we need is to not have decision making where a judge says, ‘I’m going to hand this down’—that judge being the state government or whatever—and someone has got to lose their livelihood or whatever it is.

Unless there is a totally fair system—and we are talking about compensation again, where everything a person has lost has been paid for; let us say it is the value of his land, his income and his assets that have depreciated—then there is going to be angst. The other option is that everybody comes together and says, ‘We are all going to take a 20 per cent or 30 per cent slug in our losses together. We will all share the pain together.’ And even the wider community says,

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'Because they are taking a 20 per cent slug in loss of income, we are prepared to meet them halfway.' So the community pays 10 per cent and they lose 10 per cent. So there is a lot more fairness and a recognition that it comes back from across the community—these people have lost what they had, they have invested and at the time they did it, there were no worries about doing it.

We all complain that we are not doing it right now but tomorrow we are all going to complain that what we are doing then is not right too. We are going to gain more knowledge and find that what we are doing is not spot-on. Knowledge changes, hopefully for the better. We have to realise that as we gain that knowledge we have to adapt to it and find mechanisms to make it adaptable. In water rights there is more of a compensation issue than there is with vegetation. In most cases if people have lost their water rights it is very difficult to do anything else but to pay them compensation in that situation for their loss of value.

**Mr SCHULTZ**—I understand that, but you have the compounded problem of your local representatives—as an example, at the federal level—all looking at their 80,000-odd constituents every time they think about doing something. I put the second question to you—and it may not necessarily affect you because of where you are. It is a well-known fact that the open drain and flood irrigation method that we use results in about 60 per cent evaporation of that precious commodity. Richard Pratt quite rightly raised the issue some time back that we should be putting that water into a piping system—whether it is polythene piping or whatever—specifically not only to prevent that evaporation occurring but to have that additional water available and cut down the demands on the upstream catchments and the upstream storages. That makes an enormous amount of sense to me. It will take some pretty fair commitments to get it up and running. Who in your opinion would or should pay to commence implementation of that initiative? I think that is a good starting point. Water is an enormously complex issue and you have to start somewhere. I believe Pratt has got it right. I think that is where we should be starting—reduce the wastage and the usage of it with better techniques before we start going down the track of taking property or rights away from people.

**Mr Ashby**—I totally agree with you there. We would like to see incentives for people to come up with better water use efficiencies. I have been involved with drip irrigation and I have centre pivots. I have done a bit of open flood and I have done a bit of water spreading. So I have played around with the water in different parts of Australia. It is not all as straightforward, probably, as what you have said. I know of some flood irrigation set-ups where they flood very large amounts in very quick amounts of time in the evening. Those set-ups are very efficient for minimal evaporation.

In regard to the set-up cost, if you are going to do drip irrigation or pipes or whatever else, they are going to have less evaporation, but they are going to have a lot more infrastructure costs. So there is this sort of play-off there. It is not quite as straightforward now. It depends also on your soil holding capacities. Some soils are just right for flood irrigation. They allow the right amount in for the plants. Others drain too quickly and they use too much water. It goes straight into the subsoil, away from the plant roots, and so on and so forth.

You find that each property—and in fact each paddock and sometimes each part of a paddock—reacts differently to irrigation. I notice that when I monitor my centre pivots. But getting back to your idea, I totally agree with the drain system because some of our members who have open drains in the area around New South Wales have a lot of seepage. They lose a

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lot. In those areas, if there were some way of identifying exactly which areas had the most losses and where to start first, I agree that we would make some big gains very quickly. That is where you would get the biggest bang for your bucks.

Also, somehow or other, we have to find a way of making it work so that it pays for itself. There might be an initial injection of money and then perhaps the local community would have to find a way to keep funding it. So what you had gained would make money and then that would fund the next part of the project. I have not wrapped my brain around it enough to know whether we could do it with the piping but I know that we could do it with other types of projects. That is why our group, Landholders for the Environment, is talking about becoming incorporated so that we can put our hands out for some research funds. So some of our people and scientists could work on those sorts of issues and present them to governments and the rest of the community. They could present them on television so that people could understand what they are about. We can see that it is very much needed.

**Mr SCHULTZ**—It is not like me to be controversial—and you do not have to answer this question if you do not want to—but my personal view is that we are growing crops that this country is not designed to take. In fact, we have gone overboard in terms of growing some crops, including rice—

**Mr Ashby**—Yes.

**Mr SCHULTZ**—and we should be doing something constructive to address that very serious situation. We should be cutting down on that sort of production and looking for something else, because unless we do we are going to continue to have water problems.

**Mr Ashby**—I agree with what you are saying to a degree, but we also have markets which say, ‘We want rice; we want cotton,’ and so forth. We see that both sides of that need to be addressed. How do you dampen the demand for a product? As you reduce it, up goes its value and then of course more people want to grow that crop because it is more profitable. So we have to address the whole overview and ask whether we should encourage the community to go for food alternatives or for fibre alternatives. I agree that in some areas, because of seepage and because of the soil types and the amount of damage to the land that, yes, that would be the case. But, generally speaking, the land-holders themselves recognise that. The only ones who are really caught are the ones in a bind. For example, if you have inherited a property you may not be able to get out of it because of your debt structure and so you have to keep farming it. For example, I milk cows and I have to keep milking cows the way I do because I cannot get out of it to do something else this year because of the prices that I receive. So, in the end, you get caught where you are.

That comes back to the dollars again. I think if you just make laws about it and say, ‘This area is totally out of it and we cannot grow rice here or cotton there,’ you are going to catch people and they will say, ‘Okay, we want compensation.’ You would come back to that issue. The holistic decision making process is what I am big on. Let us get the whole community together to decide—not just the land-holders themselves. Let us get other parts of Australia watching it on TV, understanding why those people are in trouble—why they grow rice there and why they use so much water—and understanding their thinking. Then we need to ask, ‘What’s our alternative?’ and go through the alternatives. We need to find out whether we can do it voluntarily so that, whatever the crop, it would grow three times as much protein for half the

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amount of water. Then you would still have some water to go back to other uses in that river system. If we can do it, why not investigate what crop it is and let us put some incentives there for those guys to move out of rice and into it? As a community we could have an incentive so that for every hectare less of rice they planted they would receive so many hundred dollars for the first year.

Those sorts of things can be the difference when you want to move from one enterprise to another. I have chopped and changed several enterprises in my lifetime and that is usually the big hurdle. You know that once you have moved that, yes, you can make it pay. But the problem is that you have to move from one to the other. You have to change either your tractors or your implements or whatever it is, or you have to gain knowledge for it. In all those things, we can see that we could probably help out with our idea of the bush region television channel that we are trying to get where we would try to give that information to people and conduct those discussions right across the community so the whole community can look at it and see what is going on.

**Mr SIDEBOTTOM**—This is probably more an observation than a question. I am listening to you pretty keenly here and taking up what John Forrest said earlier. Back to this holistic decision making: I am trying to get a handle on this. If you are trying to promote this and you see it as the best way of getting ownership of a problem and a challenge, it probably requires a little bit more in terms of offering models in order to give more detail in terms of what you envisage there. It leads to some interesting issues. If a particular catchment management group, through whatever means they have, makes certain decisions for their catchment, what happens if that is opposed to another catchment group right across the state somewhere? You can imagine this continent-wide. I can see what you are driving at in terms of public and community ownership. But I reckon this needs a lot more thrashing out and threshing out to allow decision makers at our level to be able to get on board a bit more. Otherwise, you are going to get this ‘from the top down’ stuff. I wonder how you react to that?

**Mr Ashby**—Let us talk about the Murray-Darling Basin. It is probably the biggest catchment you have. You have guys in three or four states all fighting over certain sorts of issues and saying how much water you can take out and what you cannot and all that. In that one, if you are looking at trying to set up a holistic decision making process, everyone can receive a telecast—they can all tune in. Then you would have the different people presenting their cases and what is happening in their area. It would take a fair while but people would be starting to understand and grapple with why this area wants more water and why that one says, ‘If we are going to change our crops we need this to happen.’ Someone will then say, ‘What’s the overall goal?’

That is basically what you come back to. You have to establish goals when you come in with this holistic decision making. You can have every person in the catchment that can tune in saying, ‘Yes, these are our goals.’ You do not tell them what to do first; you do not say, ‘You’ve got to stop growing rice,’ or ‘You’re not allowed to have so much water.’ You have to say, ‘What are your goals?’ If everyone can agree on those goals first then everyone can say, ‘How do we get to those goals?’

The goals should be that we want the whole system to be healthy, for a start, and then for everyone to have the amount of water they need to be healthy, to have a vibrant community and to have profitable industries and good economics flowing through the whole of the catchment.

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Once you have your goals established, you say, ‘How are we going to achieve that?’ All of a sudden, instead of seeing things as stopping and starting at borders we are seeing that things are going across the borders. That person on that side of the border may be under a different jurisdiction but if the grassroots wants the jurisdiction to actually work they can get the government to get on board because the government will see there are votes in it.

If we cannot find a way to show that people can come together and if we do not have a way to make decisions together, then it will just keep going the way it is where we end up with these stand-offs. We know that the people are trying to resolve it, but as land-holders we can have two different points of view across the fence. However, after a few beers and a bit of discussion we have a little bit of give and take and we can resolve it. If we can do that on a one-to-one basis, we believe that, although it is a bigger challenge doing it across a big catchment, it can be done—if you allow good will to happen, that is the basic thing.

**Mr SIDEBOTTOM**—Thank you. That is fantastic.

**Mr SECKER**—Are you in Kongorong?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes, I am.

**Mr SECKER**—Is it still hot, there?

**Mr Ashby**—No; we have just had about an inch of rain.

**Mr SECKER**—You were looking for that. That would have browned-off, wouldn't it?

**Mr Ashby**—Yes, the clover was starting to wobble.

**Mr SECKER**—That is good that it has rained.

**CHAIR**—On that closing note, we thank you very much. We appreciate the time that you have given us.

**Mr Ashby**—No worries.

**CHAIR**—I am quite sure that we all could have talked to you for a lot longer, but time has run out. I thank you for your cooperation. This is our first audio link and it has been very successful because of your contributions. We thank you for your submission. Our report will be brought down later on and we will make sure that you get a copy of that with the recommendations.

**Mr Ashby**—Thank you very much and I appreciate your time.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Adams**):

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 5.56 p.m.**

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