

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

By Carol Williams, Break O'Day Vegetation, Waterwatch and Rivercare Facilitator (coastal)

"That production, those jobs, and those communities are all jeopardised if we do not get water management right" - p. 1 of the Submission Kit.
There are many ways to manage water use, but only one will be the right way - CW

INTRODUCTION

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of this committee, on behalf (I am sure) of all the Waterwatchers in the Break O'Day Municipality for providing the community this opportunity to comment and give evidence to a very important inquiry.

This submission will not generalise on the serious predicament that is faced with respect to this resource overall. After all, Australia is the driest continent globally and we use nearly the greatest amount of water per head of capita than anywhere else. It is little wonder that an inquiry such as this is being held.

This submission will focus its comments mostly on the geographic area of north east Tasmania. Water resources are not so drastically in short supply, as compared to the south east of Tasmania, however these catchments have their own unique water use issues.

COMMENTS ON THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

The Centre for Groundwater Studies' graph (figure 1) graphically shows the world's supply of available fresh water.

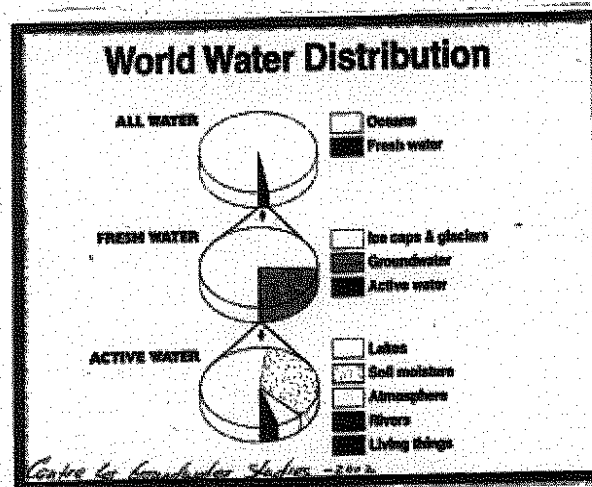


figure 1

The middle pie shows the tiniest of slivers in black - this being the available surface water as a part of all active fresh water. And then, as part of the third pie, rivers and living things are shown to be the smallest percentage of that.

This in a sense is what nature has 'given' us for our life support systems. This tiny percentage of available active water (and even if including groundwater the percentage remains small) is not a consequence of human misuse of resources - it is the way it is with respect to resource availability.

In effect, the Commonwealth does not make water available in the first instance, but the natural system does. If the Commonwealth were to take it upon itself to provide dams, for example, to provide for the retention of water, there is a great risk of damaging the very ecosystems that transport this resource as well as the life systems within it.

Australia is not only an ancient continent with ancient soils but also one of the driest. That we are now turning to crash cropping on an ever larger scale, including wetland cropping, does not actually match up with our resource availability or the scientific data which is continuously giving us these warning signals.

To impose a European style agricultural practice on such an arid land is not good management. At present, cropping in the north east is isolated to small acreages to feed stock, organic potatoes, some essential oil and olive crops. The remainder being improved pasture for milking cattle and sheep. Private land has only just begun to be seized for plantation establishment (in Pyengana) with very little if any support from the community. The hydrological demands of this crop have been documented and it has been shown that it does reduce the availability of water considerably in the first few years - and then subsequently (and really continuously) as the crop is rotated.

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.

There is one catchment in the north east which has an altered hydrology and a noticeable degraded quality of water - if the Scamander community is to be believed.

A recent community meeting held with the local council fielded questions concerning the quality of water coming from the Scamander River. Approximately 15 years ago the Scamander and Avenue River catchments were recognised as a wilderness area by government. Since that time nearly all of the upper catchments of the Scamander River had a large percentage of its native forests clearfelled and put in to plantations (still ongoing), roaded, poisoned and generally modified to a greater or lesser extent for the fibre industry.

It is no wonder the citizens are complaining about the quality of their water and this just goes to show that treatment plants are not able to provide good quality drinking water if the quality of that water is degraded to begin with!

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

It is hoped the Commonwealth government will support Tasmania's current 'Water Quality Monitoring Strategy' as it is a positive step towards regaining ground lost in the 1990's. During that decade (or possibly earlier) the network for water quality monitoring was, for the most part, dismantled along with other Primary Industry extension services. The whole infrastructure is now under consideration of being resurrected, as governments again recognise the importance of a comprehensive baseline monitoring program. A stepwise

approach to this is important. Of priority is the setting up of a monitoring network with an excellent QAQC, then to be followed by the creation of a statewide database and public reporting protocol. By setting up the latter first would be to put the cart before the horse.

The issue of how to deliver water to the community including councils, industries and agricultural sectors may not reach a resolution until all stakeholders agree on the benchmark of environmental sustainability. It is hoped that community consultation continues, however, and that blanket decisions regarding impoundments, water diversions, wetland drainage and the like are never made over the tops of the heads of communities of whom they effect.

It is not clear to what extent the Commonwealth has given its support to Protected Environmental Values (PEV's). Waterwatchers in this region have complained about the viability of (PEV's). The name implies that environmental values (water quality and ecosystem health) will be protected. Ironically there is concern that pristine or near pristine upper catchments with native forests intact will become degraded with the implementation of PEV's. This is because the 'environmental value' being protected is tied to the tenure/use adjoining the watersystem (i.e. forestry practices) and not to the maintenance of good water quality when found, nor a responsibility to restore degraded water ways when this is identified.

In a word, PEV's for upper catchments now in a pristine or a near pristine state do not provide sufficient safeguards or standards to protect good water quality, in fact, it encourages the opposite.

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

The NHT programs, especially including Waterwatch has provided education, on ground monitoring and an aware and vigilant community with respect to identifying good and poor land and water management. However, rural Australia continues to carry a cultural cringe towards non-traditional (and far less damaging) farming practices.

It is part of the Commonwealth's role to advise the rural community on what are, and what are not sustainable practices. It is hoped that the Commonwealth insists on landowners providing a 'duty of care' to their land and waterways and to actively support the non-industrial agricultural food (organic and biodynamic) sector. This is not only requires a paradigm shift in on-ground practices but is essential for the future management of ongoing resources.

The alternative future is that of a run away competition in resource demand.

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

The following quotes are taken from leading specialists in the field of climate change at a recent conference held in Hobart, "Coastal Impacts and Vulnerability" organised by the Local Government Association of Tasmania. That there is a link between poor planning when it comes to avoiding the predictions of climate change can only be assumed at this stage. However, to ignore these warnings could be devastating. Secondly, that there is no link between human activity and the impacts on water quality and quantity is also to stare obvious

evidence in the face vis a vis the current floods in central Europe and Asia.

"Tasmania needs to plan to avoid or reduce as far as possible the foreseeable impacts of climate change. That they are coming is foreseeable and the extent of uncertainty is manageable." (Nigel Townsend, 25 June 2002) and,

"However, low-lying coastal areas will be subject to increased flooding during storm surges, both as a result of increased sea levels, and possibly also because of changes in the frequency and intensity of storm surges resulting from climate change. Significant coastal residential areas and roads around Tasmania are very low-lying, and will be at increased risk of flooding" Chris Sharples, 25 June 2002.

In this context, then, it can be assumed that the coastal towns on the north east of Tasmania including St. Helens, Scamander, Ansons Bay and the other smaller townships, are becoming ever more vulnerable to increasing pressures from water and storm activities. This is especially relevant to the viability of low lying infrastructures.

While it would be fool hardy to ignore the predictions of climate change and rising sea levels, it is also bad science to ignore the call from the local communities who can foresee measures to circumvent, as much as possible, these ravages of drought and floods. Once again a quote from the conference:

"This conference has focussed on the impacts of climate change on human communities and their development and infrastructure on the coast. A similar conference could also have been held to talk about what needs to be done about the human health implications, the impacts on forestry, agriculture, irrigators or the natural communities of plants and animals of

conservation as well as economic importance." (Nigel Townsend, 25 June 2002)

The following are measures that Waterwatchers in the Break O' Day coastal area (including its catchments) have put forward as management practices to best regulate climate change AND maintain good water quality and quantity:

In the George River catchment (and tributaries), place a cap on any more land clearing especially because the Blue Tier has the second highest intensity rainfall in Tasmania as well as erodible granitic soil structure. Likewise stop land clearing in steep catchments along the coast (like below Grey and in the Scamander catchment) as this produces ever greater erosion and flash flooding.

By keeping intact the native forest estate, flash flooding will continue to be greatly moderated. The important natural vegetation cover with its deep roots prevents erosion and can regulate flow to a greater extent. It is the catchment insurance against flood damage. Likewise, the humid, wet and rainforest and other native vegetation ecologies provide for a maximum watershed yield in times of drought.

The preference for relying on ecosystem services rather than building impoundments for water regulation is that sedimentation is reduced in the longer term and ecosystem health and water quality for human consumption is preserved. By allowing nature to provide for sustainability, costs are greatly reduced and outcomes are much better assured - impoundments silt up and have a use by date and are known to alter the health of the ecosystems downstream.
