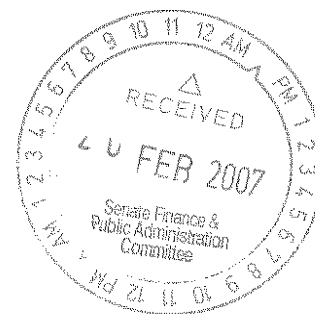


ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

National Water Commission

Additional Estimates Hearings 2006-07

(Question No. PM33)



Senator Stephens asked:

NWC met for its 7th meeting on 6 September.

- a) Discussed was a framework for consideration of iconic state and territory major water projects for the Prime Minister. Has this framework been finalised? What form does the framework take? Provide the framework to Committee.
- b) Please provide an update on the progress and timeline for delivery of the Commission's first biennial assessment of water reform measures.
- c) Update the Committee on the timeline for delivery and the outcomes of this assessment and its impact on water policy.
- d) Has work begun on the new national framework for the river wetland health which will form part of the second level assessment for the Australian Water Resources project?
- e) When will this framework be available to the Committee?
- f) How will the framework differ to the previous frameworks covering river and wetland health?

Answer:

- a) The assessment process and criteria have been finalised. Project proposals will be considered against a set of eligibility criteria. If found to be eligible, each project would then be considered against the following set of assessment criteria.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible, proposals would need to:

1. be of state and national significance with clear public benefit;
2. respond to a significant and evident urban or regional water management challenge or opportunity;
3. be accompanied by a water management plan for the region(s)/state(s);
4. include significant financial commitment by the state or territory government(s);
5. be consistent with the National Water Initiative.

Assessment Criteria

Eligible proposals would be assessed against the following assessment criteria:

1. The extent which the proposal advances the National Water Initiative.

2. The extent to which the project will deliver a lasting and genuinely transformative impact on water conservation and management in Australia.
3. The technical viability and the extent of economic, environmental and social benefits of the proposed project.
4. The extent of contributions to the cost of the proposed project from parties other than the Commonwealth.
5. Overall value for money from the proposed project.

The process for further development and consideration of proposals includes:

- Initial discussion of proposals by the Commission to identify issues and further information requirements;
- Factual presentations on the projects by jurisdictions;
- Provision of additional information as required;
- Involvement of specialist expertise to advise on aspects of proposals as required; and
- Formal consideration by the Commission and Commission advice provided to the Prime Minister.

- b) A framework for the first biennial assessment has been prepared and is supported by the jurisdictions. It is expected that the assessment will be undertaken for completion by mid 2007.

The assessment will be structured around the eight elements of the National Water Initiative (NWI). As far as possible, the assessment will be against the objective and outcomes statements contained in the NWI, to allow more targeted collation of information and consideration of matters in the report and development of advice to COAG.

Information gathering has commenced, illustrative examples have been agreed for preparation and a process seeking public submission on progress on implementation of the NWI has been initiated with public submissions expected to be called for during February 2007.

- c) Under the NWI, the biennial assessments have two main objectives:
- i) to report to COAG on progress with implementation of the NWI, and
 - ii) to advise COAG on any actions required to better realise the objectives and outcomes of the NWI.

The first biennial assessment is expected to be completed in mid 2007 and advice given under the objective ii) above will allow judgements to be made on the implementation of water policy.

- d) Development of the new national framework for river and wetland health commenced in mid 2006 and has involved workshops in all States and Territories and with the Australian Government Department of Environment & Heritage. A draft framework was considered at a national workshop that included representatives of all States and Territories, the National Water Commission, Murray Darling Basin Commission and Australian Government agencies including the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and

Environment and Heritage in Canberra on 9th November. Feedback from the Canberra workshop is being used to finalise the methodology of the Framework.

- e) The final Framework is due to be published by the National Water Commission in April this year as part of Australian Water Resources 2005.
- f) The framework builds on the approach developed during the National Land & Water Resources Audit (Australian Catchment River & Estuary Assessment 2002) and more recent advances in Victoria (Index of Stream Condition), Tasmania (Conservation of Freshwater Ecosystem Values) and the Murray-Darling Basin (Sustainable Rivers Audit). The framework will integrate with these assessments and allow for standardisation so that results can be compared across state borders. The framework will include the following components: 1. Catchment disturbance, 2. Physical form (Sediment, riparian vegetation, structural measures), 3. Hydrological disturbance (Flow Stress Ranking), 4. Water Quality (Measured and modelled data including the National Pollutant Inventory), 5. Biota (Riparian vegetation condition, invertebrates, fish, amphibians)