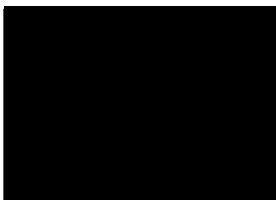


TO:  
Department of Sustainability and Environment  
ATTENTION:  
Sustainable Water Strategies Branch  
Office of Water  
PO Box 500  
East Melbourne VIC 3002



SUSTAINABLE WATER STRATEGY – NORTHERN REGION

As a member of the Bright consultative committee on water and sewerage I have been asked to provide a response to the Discussion Paper.

The enclosed comments are my personal views and do not represent a response from the consultative committee.

Yours sincerely,



Peter Bowditch

# **SUSTAINABLE WATER STRATEGY NORTHERN REGION-RESPONSE TO DISCUSSION PAPER FROM PETER BOWDITCH**

## **1. SCOPE OF DOCUMENT**

The scope of the strategy document is determined by the “Our Water Our Future: The Next Stage” document and thus consideration of the impact of adopted Government policy on the Northern Region Strategy is not addressed. However the Northern Region strategy is greatly impacted by the Sugarloaf Pipeline which will transfer some 75 GL per year from the Northern Region to Melbourne. The necessity to transfer water to Melbourne is bound up with the need to find alternative sources of water for the city and so the decision to build the desalination plant at Wonthaggi also is also an integral part of the equation.

Let’s look at some of these interweaved projects.

In the Northern Region inefficient distribution systems are estimated to lose 870GL each year (Fact sheet 2), or 800GL per year (p71 strategy doc.) depending which document is the more accurate. Proposed improvements to the efficiency of the system from 70% to 85% is estimated to increase water availability by 225GL per year ( Melbourne’s 75GLx3 ). This presumably represents a 15% improvement to only portion of the system, though this is not spelt out in the document.

If losses of 800GL per year represents the losses at 70% efficiency ( ie. 30% loss) then improving the whole system by 15% would presumably give expected savings of 400GL per year.

It would appear therefore that there is potential to increase water availability by a further 175GL per year by improving distribution efficiency over the whole system, over and above what is currently proposed.

The upgrade to save 225GL is estimated to cost \$1billion.

The estimated cost to construct the desalination plant is \$3.1billion to produce 150GL per year.

If we double the cost of saving the extra 15% of distribution system loss which has not already been programmed (assuming that the easy part has already been done) then it still is cheaper to further reduce the system losses than to build the desalination plant.

This is NOT an argument to not build the desalination plant, which might still be a good idea, but simply to point out that the Northern Region Strategy is not complete unless it includes discussion of these and associated issues such as the potential to source Melbourne water from Tasmania via an undersea pipeline.

Similarly other aspects of Government policy impact on the Northern Region do not represent sound use of available capital. For example; the availability of subsidies to encourage the installation of rainwater tanks in all urban areas. In Melbourne this policy makes sense as the saved water would otherwise be simply be discharged to Port Phillip Bay. There are potential health concerns with the use of tanks for drinking water but otherwise the policy is sound. But in the Northern Region every rainwater tank takes water from the river system which is already in dire need of more water. In addition the economics of saving water in thousands of costly small domestic tanks do not compare favourably with the cost of saving an equivalent amount of water in a deep large storage with its associated high quality water treatment plant to deliver potable water to rural towns and cities.

It would make far more sense to pay an equivalent subsidy to Northern Region users to provide cheap compost to mulch gardens and so actually reduce water use.

The problem with the strategy as it stands is thus that while it includes a wealth of detail on the micro level (the trees), it does not provide the necessary information on the macro level (the woods) to enable rational evaluations to be made as to the most appropriate way to proceed. No doubt this is because the authors of the strategy considered that the overall strategy had already been addressed in the preceding "Our Water" document but any strategy development should provide for review and defence or revision of earlier decisions in the light of more up to date knowledge eg. the current perceived rate of climate change which is now seen to be at the more extreme level of earlier expectations.

## **2 SOCIAL COST OF URBAN RESTRICTIONS**

Urban water use represents only 4% of total water use and hence it makes sense to try and evaluate the potential water savings that can be made in urban and rural use and to equate these savings against the social costs of achieving savings in the different sectors.

I would argue that the social cost of having severe urban restrictions is large compared to the potential savings and that as a consequence urban restrictions greater than level 1 are not warranted. Thus the strategy should provide for the necessary upgrades to urban water supplies to allow this level of reliability to be achieved.

A community's sense of wellbeing is enhanced by having a green garden environment. Most people would feel better living in Bright rather than Kalgoorlie and this is reflected in the overall level of home maintenance and community infrastructure maintenance which can be observed in such communities. This is not to say that people living in a desert environment will demonstrate less community pride and concern but simply that it is easier to live in a garden environment and so people have more opportunity to develop high quality domestic environs and social infrastructure such as sportsgrounds, parks, and streetscapes.

That most people would agree is demonstrated by the distribution of the great majority of Australia's population in the green Eastern seaboard. I think that most psychologists would agree that the quality of environment is important in influencing the personal and social development of individuals and thus we should aim to provide an attractive environment for all.

### **3 GAINING ACCEPTANCE OF THE STRATEGY**

It is desirable for urban dwellers to experience some level of restriction to enhance a feeling of shared responsibility with rural people and at the same time rural dwellers need to acknowledge that the cost of upgrading irrigation infrastructure will mostly be met by city people via taxes.

The level of community education and acceptance about these matters will ultimately determine the practicability of having a water system developed along rational lines, and so the strategy document should have a major segment devoted to the development of a public education program. If the strategy is to succeed it is not sufficient to convince a few hundred people who have taken an interest in the strategy by participating in consultative groups. It will be necessary to convince several million people.

The present day standard of informed response to concerns which are being expressed by community members about issues such as the Sugarloaf pipeline are pitifully ineffective in presenting good reasons for such initiatives. Senior political and policy makers should be much more prominent on TV, radio, and the press explaining just why the proposed policy is good. Similarly the standard of presentation of the case for the policy on the internet is poor.