

Sustainable Water Strategy - Northern Region
Submission on Discussion Paper

Executive Summary

The Northern Region.

The example of the reducing natural flows at the mouth of the Murray is not a Northern Victorian problem. South Australia requires fresh water for Adelaide pumped from the lower section of the Murray which would normally be saline. They overcome this by passing excess water down the Murray to keep the flow in a potable condition. This is a South Australian problem and should be fixed by the SA Government.

Planning for Climate Change.

The Government initiatives including the modernisation of irrigation systems, the unbundling of water entitlements, and the expansion of the Victorian grid. The problem here is the extent of the Victorian grid to be developed in the future is unknown and the term grid is wrong as it is a series of one way pipes taking water from Northern Victoria to Southern Victoria. Increased flexibility in the water market is at the expense of existing irrigation areas and supporting industries e.g the transfer of water out of good growing areas to entirely export orientated crops which use over twice the amount of water is considered a high valued use but the loss in social and economic activity it was derived from, would cancel out this high use assumption. The same can be said for water transferred from existing irrigation areas to cities south of the divide especially where they can get their water from rivers which are uncontrolled and would suffer no economic loss whatsoever. Transferring water out of a community cannot be a benefit, it is actually a loss to community members and values.

1. Planning secure water supplies for the future.

The Northern Region.

The population increase in the Northern region of 167,000 is an insignificant increase in the total water consumption.

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What is a Sustainable Water Strategy

The \$860 million does not cover North South pipeline or completion of the Ballarat pipeline. Does this mean there will be no other additions to the water grid before 2050?

Strategy objectives.

One of the aims is to understand threats to water availability. The biggest threat is the diversion of water out of irrigation districts to towns and cities south of the divide.

Another aim is to support an economically viable and environmentally sustainable irrigation industry. Once again the transfer of water from the irrigation industry to urban uses outside the irrigation areas could not be considered an economical support.

Maximising flexibility

Interconnecting water supply systems for water sharing across the region will reduce flexibility as the water flow is only one way, out of the irrigation regions.

Environmental Sustainability

The result is no increase in carbon dioxide emissions. This is impossible if the Government pumps large volumes of water out of irrigation districts.

2. Managing water resources in the Northern region.

The National Water Initiative.

The objective of the National Water Initiative is to achieve a nationally compatible market, regulatory and planning based system of managing surface and ground water resources for rural and urban use that optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes.

This objective is not being achieved under the banner of water trade which is the only management tool being used to effect this objective.

3.

The Murray-Darling Basin.

The Victorian part of the Murray-Darling Basin underpins large areas of irrigation in the Northern region. This water is a key factor in the State's ongoing prosperity. Why then take water from the Northern region for cities south of the divide who have many alternatives to secure their water. This will hardly help the ongoing prosperity of the State.

It would appear that Victorian conservation flows are in excess of New South Wales and Queensland and the fact that only about 20% of flows reach the end of the River Murray should be shown in the context of how much of these flows are derived from each State. The environmental consequences are mostly due to a reduction in the frequency, magnitude and duration of floods. This is caused by Government decisions to run the reservoirs at a lower level due to the selling of sales water. This reduces or negates flooding on the river which was allowed for in the design of dams as this was virtually the only high volume environmental flows available to the rivers. Floods are very costly to Governments and by promoting this policy they have saved millions of dollars.

The Living Murray Initiative

If the water in the Murray was not wasted passing Adelaide's supply point there would be sufficient water in the Murray to achieve environmental benefits for the six significant icon sites.

3. Water Resource Outlook.

Pressures and risks.

There is no pressure from over allocation, or population growth which will require very small additional water compared to the irrigation flows. Climate variability including drought is a fact of life in Northern Victoria. We are now seeing the third major drought in 100 years for which the dams were designed to cope with.

The six identified risks to the shared water resources are all controllable by Government actions except for climate change.

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Over-allocation.

The report claims the amount of water extracted from rivers and aquifers is higher than that which can sustain existing ecological objectives. The objectives were allowed for in the design of the dam, however if new ecological objectives are required by Government this water has to be found elsewhere.

Surface Water.

Reports states that over allocation in the Northern region coupled with drought is threatening environmental values. This term over-allocation is incorrect as these icon environmental sites have recovered after the two preceding droughts. The rivers in Northern Victoria are working rivers sustaining the economical viability of the regions and therefore the river environment has been changed. The decision needs to be made whether the river is there for the economic benefit of the population or the population and industries need to be reduced for the benefit of the river. Which has precedent? I would venture to say that the river environment will recover quicker than the economic loss to industry.

Timber plantations.

The Governments encouragement of timber plantations in Northern Victoria reduces the inflows to the rivers so we now see the Government action in developing these plantations seems to be at the expense of industry relying on irrigation.

Small Catchment Dams.

These are as a result of land subdivisions and therefore controllable by Government.

Bushfires.

Damage due to bushfires has escalated greatly since grazing has been reduced by Government action. Almost a million hectares has been burnt out in the north east since 2003 and the question needs to be asked, which course causes greater damage, major fires or controlled grazing ?

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Population Growth.

This is controlled by Government actions and has a very small impact on the total water availability in northern regions.

Drought and Climate Variability.

Victoria's water allocation framework has been designed to cope with drought. The management of this framework has exacerbated the impact of drought because the Government has allowed the removal of water from reservoirs to reduce any flooding.

Impacts of Drought on Water Users.

Irrigation and water urban use has been reduced since 2002/03 in line with the gradual draw down of storage levels. This use has been caused by Government action in selling additional water and thereby forcing storage levels to drop. This has severely depleted the security of supply held in storage for any following dry years.

Responding to Drought.

Applying water restrictions when supplies are in short supply can be overcome in major towns by recycling storm water etc.

Qualification of Rights.

The report states this is a temporary emergency response and it is not meant to replace drought response planning or long-term water resource planning. Any qualification of rights in this day and age is indicative of lack of Government planning and action.

Forecasting Future Water Availability.

Governments should plan for the worst and hope for the best. Climate change can be forecast but is not a certainty and so towns should carry out measures to reduce water waste and reservoirs should hold the maximum available at all times and not have water run down by Government action.

No 4 Managing Water Scarcity.

If Government action in reducing waste and upholding the security of supplies in reservoirs does not cover future losses in the

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availability of water it becomes a Government matter to decide how the water will be distributed between the users in the Northern regions.

Water Trading.

Water trade has virtually no effect on the total volume of water available. It merely transfers water from one district to another, but can have a disastrous effect on the economies of some of the districts involved.

The water availability in Northern Victoria needs to be kept within the region until the Government can manage the water to reduce waste through their infrastructure and maintain the maximum security of supply for end users. All the comments requested in chapter 4 are meaningless.

The Government's proposed water grid is the greatest con of all time and completely out of character with any reasonable Government initiative. Labor's water grid is only proposed to take water from stressed catchments north of the divide to supply major towns and cities south of the divide, while the Government is very pleased to watch huge volumes of water in the south flowing rivers rush out to sea.

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B M Bassed Dip.CE

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