

City Of Greater Bendigo's Response to: Sustainable Water Strategy - Northern Region Discussion Paper

Development of a Northern Sustainable Water Strategy (NSWS) is in progress and the State Government has released a Discussion Paper for comment. Through the development of the Strategy all aspects of water management in northern Victoria will be analysed and discussed with the community in an effort to find a fair and equitable balance between all water user groups into the future.

Introduction

The City Of Greater Bendigo has been dealing with drought and significant water shortages for the last 6 years. In that time The City and its community have transformed past 'carefree' water usage habits into ones of minimisation. Significant water savings have been made by retrofitting buildings both residential and industrial, changing processes and procedures for the management of recreation facilities such as pools, parks and playgrounds, utilising recycled water where possible and installing new delivery infrastructure.

The City has undertaken significant works projects to connect as many community recreation areas as possible to the recycled water pipeline as an alternative to potable supply. Community groups, particularly in the recreation area, have worked very closely with the City to adapt their operations to a water restricted environment.

The following is the City Of Greater Bendigo's response to the topics and issues raised in the Discussion Paper.

Storage and distribution rules/protocols into the future in a changing climate

As we have witnessed over the past decade, operating protocols for water storage systems have not been flexible enough to deal with times of prolonged low inflow. This has created uncertainty and a higher level of anxiety within the communities and between impacted industries.

- Future operating rules/protocols for water reserves need to be conservative and include adaptive strategies that will be triggered by changed inflow scenarios to allow earlier implementation of operational changes to reduce boom to bust effects within one to two season.

Community Education and Awareness

There are several areas where an increased community education and awareness is required. Over the past few years of reduced allocation it has become evident that many water users and industry groups are not aware of the basic operational protocols governing the supply and delivery systems to which they belong.

- Information on the government's position regarding the hierarchy of water use in extreme low or dry inflow scenarios should be publicised more widely. (ie First Ministers Council determined that; domestic & stock- first, environment – second and industry/agriculture – third.) The community finds it difficult to accept imposed solutions to difficult choices if they have no prior knowledge of the government position and possible consequences beforehand.
- The intended purpose of Environmental water allocations and reserves should be broadly publicised.

Security of Environmental flows

- Environmental water reserves should be defined and allocated for each river system.

- Environmental reserves should not be subject to inequitable operating protocols. The protocol that dictates that the first water to spill over a dam is deemed to be environmental reserve or allocation may be detrimental to the long term health of lower reaches of the system. In periods of subsequent low flow there maybe no over-the-wall spills for several years and the environmental water reserve would have to accumulate again to a level that could yield significant benefit from a release.
- Government needs to commit to delivering environmental water as allocated under all scenarios.

Groundwater

- As a matter of some urgency, significant research needs to be dedicated to a better understanding of the extent and movement of the ground water resources.
- Groundwater use, distribution, licensing, entitlement, etc should be considered within the context of the total available water stock accessible to a larger area. The unrestricted use of groundwater within areas experiencing severe water restrictions on other water sources does not recognise the interconnected nature of surface and groundwater.

Over-allocation

- The development of the NSWWS provides the opportunity to address the issue of over-allocation of river systems and put in place long-term solutions.

Reliability of Water Share

- Reducing the number of years with very low or zero allocations would be preferable for agricultural industries involving horticulture/viticulture or stock, as well as industries dependant on a base level regular water supply.

Carryover

- More information needs to be provided to the community to inform of the cumulative effects of carryover on the source pool and operating protocols.
- There is a need for careful consideration of the issues and consequences of demand for delivery of carryover water in adverse conditions. Information with regard to the security and delivery reliability (operating protocols) for the delivery of carryover water needs to be clarified particularly in situations where carryover volumes are small and system losses in delivery would be high.
- Horticulturalists should have some certainty about a consistent supply by having the opportunity to bank carryover water for say a five year period to flatten the peaks and troughs and support their financial operations (similar to the farmers' tax scheme)

Lengthen irrigation season

- This would lead to an increase in system losses due to seepage and evaporation.

Distribution losses

- Water Authorities already have an allocation to cover distribution losses associated with the delivery of water entitlements, if the system was to operate longer leading to an increase in losses, the beneficiaries would need to pay unless there were benefits to the environment and all user groups, and savings could be made elsewhere to compensate.

Defer allocation at very low levels

- Minimum flow levels in some systems are required to maintain environmental values in rivers and streams.

- Industries based around horticulture/viticulture and stock would be disadvantaged further if allocations were deferred when at very low levels.

Water and Social Impacts

It would seem that the discussion paper totally overlooks the social impacts of water scarcity and the equity issues that arise. It is widely understood that water access and proximity to water bestows many broad community benefits including a sense of well being, increased recreational opportunities etc. The importance of this anthropological association between water and people should not be underestimated nor ignored in any further strategy to be developed.

Serious Concern

An apparent failing of this report is that it is predicated on the current climate being an aberration rather than accepting that we are experiencing the impact of climate change.

14 March, 2008