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Regional Water Strategies
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Draft Western Regional Water Strategy

On the basis that

- Water sustains all life, and is much more than a tradeable commodity for profit.
- Robust rules that deliver equity, are accountable, and transparently administered by government on behalf of its citizens should be a given.
- There is real need for trustworthy Water Strategy documents, at regional level as well as state wide, to guide management which is relevant for city dwellers as well as local communities.

I welcome the development of state and regional Water Strategies and contribute the following brief comments on the draft Western Regional Water Strategy.

1 It is important that the suite of regional Water Strategies is both consistent with the wider framework of the State Water Strategy, robust, and mutually compatible – particularly relevant for the western region where the major watercourses receive most of their water flows from upstream regions and a ‘flood and drought’ weather pattern is the natural norm. The need to work co-operatively with upstream regions within NSW and with Queensland is strongly supported.

2 Turning around the ‘drying out’ of the western region of the past two centuries which have followed the thousands of years of first nation occupation is challenging and costly. In particular I note the cumulative but unsustainable levels of grazing by stock and introduced herbivores; clearing; industry and the manipulation of water flows along with extraction of water locally and upstream – effects increasingly exacerbated by climate change. It is more than time to face up to these challenges; business as usual is not a viable approach.

3 Further reduction of water flows through the system by entrenching new and compensable extractive licences and associated works is not acceptable. It is also necessary to revisit acceptability of infrastructure development that impedes flows essential to replenish the floodplains downstream within and beyond the region. A review of weirs in the region is needed. In-stream infrastructure that ponds water adversely affects natural connectivity and movement of aquatic biota while favouring introduced carp. Where no longer justifiable such blockages should be removed.

4 Managing water demand should be a given in all regions. Even in areas where the total extraction of water for human domestic use represents a small percentage of overall extraction, water demand management provisions foster a conservative mind-set areas such

that profligate waste of water becomes recognised as socially unacceptable and grey water re-use is supported.

5 The statements on anticipated increase in groundwater use are of concern. Increased extraction of groundwater should not be permitted in the absence of much better knowledge of flows, interconnectedness and recharge, and the implications for groundwater dependent ecosystems.

With respect to the Artesian Basin the cap and piping option to reduce bore flows is strongly supported. Mound springs are significant environmental sites serving as irreplaceable refugia but can be affected by drawdown as well as inappropriate land-use. To quote from a report of the NSW Scientific Committee under the Threatened Species Act, NSW Mound Springs, referring to Peery Lake “...presence in the conservation reserve will not protect the ecological community from the threat of alteration of flows as the unsustainable extraction of artesian water occurs outside the reserve, yet may influence all mound springs within the region.”

6 It is important to ensure first nation people have a meaningful role in not only developing but also in implementing regional water strategy. Token consultations are not enough. Communities within and beyond the region will not thrive unless the rivers and water sources are healthy.

7 Overall, as highlighted by recent events including major fish-kills, blue-green algal outbreaks, and decline of water-dependent fauna including water birds, freshwater mussels and turtles, the long term health of the Darling Baaka is in serious trouble. Recent wetter weather has helped but until and unless environmental flows are sufficient and safeguarded from extraction the long term of the system remains vulnerable. Water sharing plans must be revised to ensure adequate down stream flow targets are in place, extractions metered and compliance ensured.

The powerful documentary *River* – screened on ABCplus this very evening -concludes that if we look after the river it will look after us, down stream and for future generations. A simple but strong message that should be at the core of NSW Water Strategy for the long term future.

My comments above are submitted as an individual with over fifty years of involvement in Murray Darling basin issues, initially resident in South Australia and now in New South Wales advocating for equitable and sustainable management of our natural resources.

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