

Department of Planning and Environment - Water
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Friday 10 November 2023

Re: Submission to the Lachlan Regional Water Strategy

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above document. I do so on behalf of the Central West Environment Council (CWEC). CWEC represents fourteen local environment groups situated in centres throughout the Central West of New South Wales. Several groups are directly associated with the management of the Lachlan River, and all groups support action for the environmental health and sustainability of local aquatic environments.

Our response to the Lachlan Regional Water Strategy is largely positive. We do, however, have some concerns.

Priority 1: Building resilience to climate change: CWEC acknowledges the necessity of taking the present and future impacts of climate change into account when planning water management strategies for the Lachlan. We support initiatives for climate mitigation and adaption which promote demand management, education, creative alternatives to extraction and state of the art modelling. We do not support proposals for increased infrastructure such as dams and pipelines. Such initiatives favour increased consumption when we should be putting our efforts into actions that promote lower rates of water usage.

We also do not support strategies that promote increased consumption of groundwater in the Lachlan basin. Lachlan groundwater has been significantly depleted due to drought and over extraction. As a resource it is not well understood. CWEC would support further research into the location and availability of groundwater. Improved understanding of groundwater sources

and demand is critical. Research also needs to be done on the impact on groundwater dependent ecosystems of groundwater extraction and permanent aquifer drawdown.

If we are to effectively employ all climate adaptive strategies, we must consider the use of recycled water. This process is often viewed with suspicion by communities and is subject to misinformation. The inclusion of recycled water as a demand management strategy would be better accepted if there was to be a statewide education plan concerning the safe use of recycled water.

Priority 2: Improve catchment health: The strategy describes a number of steps which CWEC considers necessary to improve the health of the Lachlan catchment. They include actions related to reduction of the amount of sediment that enters the system, prevention of erosion and the rehabilitation of degraded riparian areas. The establishment of fish passages are welcome, as is a plan to manage the Lachlan floodplains. CWEC urges caution when it comes to management of re-regulating structures. There must be a thorough environmental assessment conducted before any development of this nature can occur.

Consideration must be given to the provision of a healthier habitat for our native fish populations, which could include improved fish passage, which could be achieved by the removal of structural impediments such as unnecessary weirs.

Priority 3: Support a strong and sustainable economy on a capped system. CWEC is very supportive of the concept of a capped system. This allows for accepting the fact that the Lachlan water availability is a finite resource, and that there is a limit to the development of industries that rely heavily on water resources such as mining. CWEC advocates a greater emphasis on demand management across the entire spectrum of water use. Greater, more efficient and creative demand management will have the result of releasing more water for river ecosystem health, especially during periods of drought.

Acknowledgement of the rights of First Nations People: CWEC supports the actions proposed by the Strategy to acknowledge the rights of our First Nations people when it comes to the management of water in the Lachlan River. We support the acknowledgement that the river is of cultural significance and that the First Nations people recognise a strong connection to it and a cultural responsibility to look after its health. It is vital that those who are responsible for the management of the Strategy work closely with local aboriginal communities to respect and combine both deep time indigenous knowledge and culture with current scientific practice. Indigenous communication with the mainstream community is important in the transmission of values associated with a “caring for country” attitude which can promote a more environmentally sensitive community.

Conclusion:

- CWEC is supportive of the many positive options put forward by the Strategy. It is particularly supportive of those options that promote a healthy aquatic environment through reparation and conservation. We support actions to promote a healthier environment for aquatic flora and fauna based on the assumption that river health is to be

given a top priority. We also applaud the recognition that we must employ adaptive measures to our water management to accommodate the change wrought by climate change.

- We do not support recommendations which promote further development of infrastructure that allows for further extraction. CWEC advocates further research into strategies associated with demand management, including solutions which allow river communities to utilise water resources more sustainably.
- We support limits to water use via a capped system. This includes limiting the amount of water intensive mining activity in the Lachlan basin.
- We applaud the strategy's acknowledgement of the rights of our First Nations people, including their right to become involved in decisions relating to water management. We live in hope that their caring for country culture will influence mainstream values when it comes to caring for the Lachlan,

