

Comments
Draft Border Rivers Regional Water Strategy

To whom it may concern

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the development a Regional Water Strategy for the Border Rivers catchments.

I have two overall comments that set the context for more specific items:

- It is mentioned in the long list of options document that one of the benefits to environmental water is "*improve coordination and planning to improve environmental outcomes*". I don't think this is just an environmental outcome. I have provided comments on various water sharing plans, water resource plans, water quality plans, long term water plans, etc. and it would seem the process is the wrong way around. That is there is no overarching approach to improving water management in NSW. A State Water Strategy that outlines a set of principles and objectives could guide these various sub-plans and be most useful. I appreciate rivers take various forms: that coastal streams are different to inland rivers, and fluvial floodplains are different incised river valleys- but a strategy based a common set of considerations around clusters of river form and function would aid in ensuring there was; i) a consistent connection between the various sub-plans within a management unit and ii) reduce the possibility of perverse outcomes arising from localised issues and the desire to have impose scalable catchment boundaries when a management unit is simply a tributary of a larger system. (e.g. the Border Rivers contribute 19% to the Barwon Darling river flows). There is a need to urgently progress the 20-year state water strategy, so there is not this piece-meal approach to water planning.
- It would also seem that this particular process appears to counter the objectives of the NSW *Water Management Act 2000* which prioritises environmental health of water sources. Indeed in subsection 9 of the Act, it states the NSW Government must take all reasonable steps to prioritise the protection of the water sources and their dependent ecosystems. Yet it would seem environment concerns are optional: "*Options included in the final strategy for each region will address at least one of these objectives: local community needs, economic prosperity, indigenous water rights, protect and enhance the environment, and affordability*". The process clearly seeks to foster growth in water dependency - despite the lack of water for town and the massive fish kills we have experienced over recent years. Particularly with statements like "*The regional water strategies will build on existing NSW Government commitments to improve water security, resilience and reliability across regional NSW, including investment in water infrastructure, a range of state-wide water reforms and a new streamlined approval process for drought-related projects.*"

There is a need to make this document more compliance of the NSW Water Management Act

Proposed instream infrastructure

The document states the: *NSW Government has made significant commitments to address the risks associated with water reliability in regional NSW and to set our regions up for the future. This includes investigating dam upgrades, including undertaking a business case for a new dam on the Mole River, investing in water saving infrastructure and preparing for future droughts.*

However it cannot act in contravention to the Water Management Act nor focus on desires of a particular local community when rivers are the lifeblood to communities downstream. It has both wider legal and moral obligations. Any infrastructure that seeks to regulate flow and capture water in the Border Rivers will impact on connectivity flows to the Barwon-Darling. There are several proposals in the strategy that will capture important connectivity flows to the Barwon-Darling. I make the follow points about them:

- There is no demonstrable need for the Mole River Dam in regard to town water supply.
- Similarly the raising Pindari Dam will further regulate and alter the natural flow regime of rivers in the valley, impacting native species and ecosystems.
- increasing water capture in Mungindi Weir simply will further regulate and alter the natural flow regime of rivers in the valley, impacting native species and ecosystems.

No towns in the Border Rivers ran out of water and allocations for towns and domestic users for the 2019/20 water year.

The strategy states "*The Border Rivers Regional Water Strategy will build on these commitments and reforms, seek to enhance and leverage them where possible, and address any outstanding gaps.*" It is important to consider this infrastructure takes a long time to plan and build. Moreover once it place, it has a profound impact. Thus it is important the considerations of this infrastructure undergo due diligence, in terms of environmental impact and business case.

I would also like to state that the ideas water managers build in-stream infrastructure to meet essential town needs is 'old thinking' and advances in off-stream management infrastructure to achieve the stated outcomes should be considered.

Options to improve environmental health

I strongly support the options proposed to improve the environmental health of river systems. The options to mitigate cold water pollution, and use of screens is commendable. I would note, however, fish need to move and make use of both lentic and lotic habitats. The idea that you can achieve these outcomes and yet increase river regulation needs closer scrutiny. The removal of structures from floodplains that hinder flood flows, downstream connectivity, groundwater recharge, the transfer of nutrients and fish breeding opportunities must be given a high priority. Connectivity between rivers and floodplains is a key function for river system health. I therefore support "*Modification and/or removal of existing flood work structures causing adverse impacts*"

I note there is no specific mention of fish passage. There are at least 11 fishways across NSW that are outstanding commitments of WaterNSW as offset provisions for previously approved infrastructure augmentation. When committing to new in-stream infrastructure, the NSW Government must make allowances for fish passage, and that passage needs to be designed to

allow for movement both ways (up and down river) and must use a design (undershot or overshot) that does not cause mortality and harm to fish seeking to use the infrastructure.

Rather than simply state NSW fish passage strategy in the document. The document should list the components of the strategy it will seek to implement. For example Mungindi Weir should be added to the list of 10 priority weirs. Where appropriate, weir removal is the best means of enabling fish passage and concurrently increases the flowing habitat required by several threatened fish species.

Climate Change

The document suggests climate change predictions for the Border Rivers region are a worst case scenario, but those predictions are more likely to be what the region will really experience. They indicate rainfall runoff in the region could reduce by up to 40%, winter & spring rainfall will decrease, autumn & summer rainfall will increase, while evaporation, average temperatures and the number of hot days will increase. Managing water demand must be the main objective of the Border Rivers Regional Water Strategy. However it is not just town usage (e.g. Option 26 reduce, recycle water) that need to be examined. Option 27 solving the problem of high evaporation rates from on farm storages may significantly reduce demand. There are Australian products available to cover water surfaces or floating solar farms could provide a double benefit.

Yours faithfully

