



P.O. Box 1589 Ballarat Vic 3354
phone: (03) 5332 1240 fax: (03) 5334 4548
email: admin@committeeforballarat.com
web: committeeforballarat.com

MEDIA RELEASE

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Grave water crisis facing regional cities

Victoria's three major regional cities - Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo – are facing a grave water shortage which threatens existing industry and future prospects for employment, investment and growth, according to chair of the Committee for Ballarat, Noel Coxall.

Mr Coxall said the situation was patently obvious when present reservoir levels were considered.

- Geelong – in June 2005 reservoirs were at about 47% capacity, they are now at 25%;
- Ballarat – in June 2005 reservoirs were at about 40% capacity. They are now at 25%;
- Bendigo – in June this year reservoirs were only at 13.5% capacity.

“By comparison, Melbourne has 48% capacity at present, a situation which can tend to blind decision-makers and residents in the capital from the dire reality facing their regional cousins,” Mr Coxall said.

Mr Coxall said there was an urgent need to finalise and implement the Sustainable Water Strategy for the Central Region of Victoria which includes Ballarat and Geelong.

A Committee for Ballarat task team, of which Mr Coxall is chair, has already urged the State Government to interconnect the water supplies of Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat as part of the wider central region strategy.

Mr Coxall described the situation as being of major national proportions which required input from all levels of government.

“Whether water remains a state issue or becomes a Commonwealth responsibility, all governments must be involved in a bipartisan way in meeting the challenge and addressing these issues which are critical to the nation's future.

“Politicians on both sides of the political fence and at both Commonwealth and State level have an obligation to these regional communities to declare what they think should be done to address this crisis.

“It may require, for instance, the pumping of water from the wetter northern parts of the country to the drier southern. These are projects of national proportions with the potential to help solve a crisis of national proportions.

“Governments cannot just wait for it to rain. Growing populations, vibrant economies and the lifestyle demands of communities outside the capitals, coupled with the impacts of global warming and generally much drier conditions, have exposed an urgent need to revitalize and rethink strategies for the supply of this precious water resource.”

Among solutions already under discussion are:

- Pumping water from the Cairn Curran Reservoir to supplement Ballarat’s supplies;
- Connecting the Melbourne and Geelong supplies;
- Possible future water storages in the Otways;
- Desalination plants;
- Exploring the best options to reduce evaporation from water storages. One solution has, according to the deputy premier, saved a billion litres in the Thompson Dam.

Mr Coxall said the lead times for these projects were already looking far too long as demand outstripped the ever-dwindling supplies.

“There must not be an ad hoc response to this matter. A plan with the support of all sides of politics and all levels of government is essential,” Mr Coxall said.

“Development of such a plan must not be determined by political time lines and imperatives.”

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CONTACT: Peter Dwyer, Communications Consultant, Organised Success, Ballarat.

0408.137.174 or 5334.4590.