

Response to the Draft Northern Region Sustainable Water Strategy

Context

Committee for Ballarat facilitates economic and social development within Ballarat and its region to leave a notable and sustainable legacy for the entire community. We are not party-political and work closely with the three levels of government. Membership is drawn from a wide range of business and community leaders in Ballarat and across the region.

We identify and work through projects that target priority issues in key areas. Our projects are driven by expert task teams, and one of our highest priority projects relates to sustainable capture, distribution, use and re-use of water across the region.

Ballarat and the region, through Central Highlands Water, is a purchaser of water from willing sellers in the Goulburn Murray system, hence our strong interest in the Strategy. The water is delivered to Ballarat through the Ballarat leg of the Goldfields Superpipe. With the effects of climate change becoming increasingly apparent through substantial reductions in annual rainfall and runoff across our region, Ballarat (and the region) is increasingly reliant on water from the Goulburn system. We have a strong interest in maintaining sustainability and reliability of that supply.

For the sake of comparisons and prior to the superpipe, Goulburn Valley average residential water users pay much less for their annual water supply than those in Central Highlands (by a factor of 0.7) yet use much more water (by a factor of 1.7). With the State and nation being more attuned to wise and efficient water use, we would expect and hope these figures to come more into line in the near future. As at December 2008, Ballarat storages remain under 15% and residents are into their third year of stage 4 water restrictions, prohibiting all outside use of reticulated water.

Committee for Ballarat welcomes

The emphasis in the draft plan for:

- development of a long term strategy and action plans based on the best available sources of information;
- inclusion of more rigorous assessments of impacts of climate change than were included in the discussion paper;
- a degree of emphasis on efficiencies in water use (although we would like to see more);
- focus on the need to consider all categories of water user, including the environment; and
- (rapid and accelerating) increases in our understanding and regulation of all available water sources, including groundwater.

Committee for Ballarat does not support:

- the relative failure in the report to consider a plan that responds to continuing sharp declines in water from natural rainfall and inflows to storages predicted in the worst climate change models;
- the promotion in the report of 'protect yourself' strategies for individual (larger) landholders. This includes encouragement to build more and potentially larger on-farm/property storages. We believe these contribute to worsening inflows to reservoirs and availability of water for systemic use;
- the relative failure to promote efficient use, including comprehensive recycling systems, to compensate continued worsening of natural availability. This applies particularly to higher volume users.

The report would be strengthened if it also considered:

- potential community-based responses to serious water shortages, instead of almost exclusively focusing on systemic responses and some reference to single user's actions;
- the potential impact of above-predicted/worst case demand from metro Melbourne, Bendigo and Ballarat on the (increasingly scarce) available water in the region;
- more active consideration of substitutions for potable supply, including use of recycled water of appropriate quality for a range of agricultural, horticultural and industrial applications, to protect higher quality potable water for selected use.

Conclusions

Committee for Ballarat reiterates its active interest in the northern region's water supply and welcomes the moves towards a sustainability (long term) strategy. We believe the failure to take into account the full range of reasonably predictable possible scenarios, particularly the worst case situation for declining natural supply, is a risk. Because the consequences of such a scenario are so serious and constitute a major risk, exclusion of reasonable consideration of how it would be managed is not acceptable.

Committee for Ballarat also believes sustainability can be improved and the risks partially averted by increasing the emphasis placed on recycling water for all purposes, including substitutions and supplementing the potable supply, with priority actions focusing initially on the largest users.

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