



## **Water Planning in Australia: National Water Commission position**

### ***Water planning in Australia***

Effective water planning is fundamental to the National Water Initiative (NWI) because it provides certainty about the terms of access for consumptive and environmental water users within an evidence-based, participatory and transparent process. Water planning is central to dealing with the challenges of stressed water systems and to determining how we share valuable water resources between competing uses.

Water planning processes have not always been of the necessary high standard and the roll out of completed water plans has been too slow.

The quality and extent of science and data underpinning water plans remains a critical concern and socio-economic information can be inadequate. There is an urgent need to better manage the connectivity between surface and groundwater resources and to more effectively factor in the impacts of climate change. Water plans also need to incorporate the effects of significant interception activities, such as farm dams and forestry, on future water availability. Returning stressed water systems to sustainable levels of extraction is not convincingly tackled in many water plans, and transparent decision making is lacking in some instances.

### ***Planning commitments under the National Water Initiative***

When they signed the NWI, all governments around Australia agreed to follow a nationally consistent approach to water planning. The NWI provides clear direction for water planning by:

‘Recognising that settling the trade-offs between competing outcomes for water systems will involve judgements informed by best available science, socio-economic analysis and community input, statutory water plans will be prepared for surface water and groundwater management units in which entitlements are issued (paragraph 36).’

## *Progress on water planning*

In its 2007 Biennial Assessment and its 2008 update report to the Council of Australian Governments on progress in water reform, the Commission found whilst NWI parties have made good progress in implementing agreed water planning processes, the roll out of completed water plans has been slow. Delays have occurred due to the need for adequate consultation, insufficient time to source the required science, and resource constraints. No jurisdiction can yet claim to have a fully effective water planning system.

## *Future water planning priorities*

The National Water Commission continues to regard NWI-consistent water planning as the best way to reconcile competing demands for water and tackle overallocation or overuse of water resources. A set of priority actions has been identified to assist governments in meeting their commitments under the National Water Initiative and to build community confidence in water planning processes. Future water planning should:

- Achieve a shared understanding of sustainable levels of water extraction so that over-allocation is both rectified and avoided in the future.
- Improve our knowledge of groundwater-surface water connectivity, with significantly connected systems to be managed as one integrated resource.
- Factor in the impacts of climate change and the effects of interception activities (e.g. farm dams, forestry) on future inflows and recharge.
- Ensure that environmental outcomes are clearly specified, decisions are based on best available information, and environmental managers have adequate resources.
- Increase inputs from socio-economic analyses and incorporate consultation to improve the quality of decisions and build community confidence in the fairness of outcomes.
- Give higher priority to ensuring that the values and interests of indigenous people are considered.
- Be better integrated with regional natural resource management planning and urban water supply planning.
- Provide adequate resources to develop and implement water plans, and evaluate their outcomes.
- Improve monitoring and compliance of water use.

The National Water Commission is supporting efforts to improve water planning efforts through targeted investments in projects. The Commission has also published a Waterlines paper: *Water Planning Processes and Lessons Learned* to highlight lessons learned by individual States and Territories in the interests of sharing these experiences more widely to advance water planning in Australia.