

Groundwater, the Metropolitan Water Plan and Desalination

The Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water signed an order (effective June 1) imposing restrictions on bore water use in the Blue Mountains City Council area where a reticulated water supply is available. His commitment to the use of tap water versus bottled groundwater was demonstrated launching the Society's 'tap water' campaign on 22nd June at Katoomba High School. Furthermore, the Department of Natural Resources (now largely subsumed by DECC, the Minister's department) imposed an embargo on new water bores over the Blue Mountains Sandstone Water Shortage Zone GWMA 606, effective from February 2nd. February.

The restrictions on bore water use (due to terminate or be re-applied on December 1) and the embargo should not be lifted because of recent rains. It is all too easy to forget the prior depletion of Lake Burragorang (Sydney's main water supply), particularly if the transfer from the Shoalhaven is excluded, and to disregard Sydney's increasing population. No amount of desalination and bore-field readiness (at Kangaloon, Leonay and Wallacia) should be allowed to cloud the real need for a **truly sustainable plan to cope with drought, climate change and an increasing population footprint**.

The present article outlines the Society's beliefs extraction/exploitation of groundwater, a sustainable water supply, and the latest desalination bravado.

Groundwater extraction/exploitation in the Blue Mountains

The Society is of the view that:

- (a) Based on the *precautionary principle* and the need to ensure that 'our' World Heritage Area is not added to the international Endangered World Heritage list, a permanent embargo should be placed on any new bores for groundwater extraction from regions in and peripheral to the National Parks of the Blue Mountains, the World Heritage Area and Endangered Newnes Plateau Shrub Swamps, and all other endangered or threatened communities throughout the Greater Blue Mountains region.
- (b) The existing ministerial order should be extended, both in time, with a view to effectively making restrictions permanent, and in level of restrictions, with a view to precisely matching those applicable to the reticulated water supply.
- (c) All currently un-metered domestic and stock bores in any region with a reticulated water supply should have meters installed with a view to charging for kilolitres consumed at rates commensurate with Sydney Water, less a nominal treatment cost. The aim is to remove the current advantage enjoyed by those able to afford bores that extract water destined for base-flow environmental needs and the water supply for Sydney and other regions. In effect, such users are stealing from the environment and 'drinking' at the expense of our water supplies.
- (d) The pricing structure of groundwater extracted for commercial exploitation should be reviewed and set at a level commensurate with the engendered environmental and community sacrifices, and the retail revenue generated. The notion of a licence to extract groundwater costing ~\$200 for a water volume marketed at \$20 million is unacceptable exploitation of a community and environmental asset.
- (e) A full review should be implemented to establish the CUMULATIVE short- and longer-term impacts on groundwater resources and dependent base flows, of underground and open-cut coal mining and electric power generation in and peripheral to the Western and Southern Coalfields.
- (f) The Subsidence Management Plan process applicable to underground coalmining should be reviewed. The aim should be to mitigate gross disruption of the hydrologic regime. Disregarding cumulative and longer-term effects, and mining until damage can incontrovertibly be proved and then attempting remediation or offering compensation is unacceptable. The present system places the onus of proving damage on the community; in doing so, it totally disregards the *precautionary principle*.

The Sydney Metropolitan Water Plan

The Society believes that:

- (a) The plan must be sustainable in the context of climate change and the demands of an expanding population. It should be structured for the next 25-50 years, rather than be expediently focussed on the shorter term of 15 years.
- (b) The most economical and sustainable approach that grows with the population and has the capacity to accommodate climate change must involve a structured progression comprising:
 - Government-subsidised rainwater tanks connected to toilets, washing machines and other 'non-potable' household applications.

- An immediate commitment to introduce comprehensive Indirect Potable Recycling (IPR) and coastal stormwater harvesting – this is the only system that automatically grows with the demands of an expanding population, can accommodate climate change predictions, and breaks the unsustainable ‘single use and throw it away’ mentality.
 - Permanent retention of level 3 restrictions to promote community awareness, together with structured price signals to encourage appropriate economic behaviour.
- (c) Desalination and groundwater exploitation should be rejected as too expensive, environmentally insensitive, and lacking the in-built capacity of IPR to grow with an expanding population.
- (d) There should be an independent public enquiry into the relative merits of desalination versus IPR and comprehensive stormwater harvesting that is unencumbered by gross distortions such as “are you prepared to drink sewage?”

You will be aware that the Government has recommitted to desalination (e.g. “No stopping desalination even if the dam spills over”, Wendy Frew, SMH 27 June p7). The Society believes that this is a major mistake and that the Government should reconsider its position before becoming financially and contractually locked into this inferior option.

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