

**Submission
No 20**

**SUPPORT FOR DROUGHT AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN NEW SOUTH
WALES**

Name: Ms Adrienne Shilling

Position: Secretary

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SUPPORT FOR DROUGHT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN NSW

I write regarding the following Terms of Reference:

- (i) particular impacts on Indigenous communities; and
- (j) any other related matter: the impacts of human-induced climate change (global warming)

Introduction/background

I note the promotional video for this Inquiry makes no specific reference to First Nations (Indigenous or Aboriginal) peoples affected by the current drought and the specific impacts on them in various towns across NSW. It would seem they are subsumed under the heading "community". I readily acknowledge the shocking impacts of the drought on non-indigenous people (those referred to in the promotional video) and the anguish and desperation they are suffering. And I recognise that entire communities are affected. However, because of the lack of specific reference to and inclusion of Indigenous people, I wish to focus here on their situations.

At the outset, let me be clear that I am not writing on behalf of any Aboriginal communities but rather, as a witness to some aspects of their situations. I aim to have their various plights meaningfully addressed in this Inquiry with a view to including Aboriginal representatives from across communities in NSW to contribute their suggestions for addressing the impacts of the drought.

In October 2019, I was part of a contingent that toured the following townships in north-western NSW: Walgett, Brewarrina, Wilcannia, Cobar, Bourke, Menindee Lakes and Broken Hill. I visited these places as part of Yaama Ngunna Baaka Corroboree Festival ("Water for Our Rivers") led by Indigenous elder Bruce Shillingsworth. I saw first-hand the devastating impacts on townspeople – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – of the lethal combination of prolonged drought, withholding of water from the Barwon/Darling Rivers from further upstream, and the social consequences arising from the continuous lack of flowing water. It will probably not come as a surprise to the Committee that the combination of these factors is leading to high rates of unemployment, general poverty, widespread depression and despair and ultimately, increasing rates of suicide among First Nations communities.

I confine my comments to those towns noted above while of course recognising the ravages of the drought on First Nations communities across towns and hamlets in NSW.

Case study – Wilcannia It is a terrible paradox that the First Nations people were able to care continuously for this continent over thousands of years during naturally occurring drought, flood and everything in between. Yet now, as we all endure what appear to be the worst droughts, floods and fires since European settlers began keeping records, the rights and needs of Indigenous peoples in the affected areas are being given the lowest priority.

I quote here from a local indigenous man in Wilcannia – Mr Brendan Adams - who spoke to a group of us from the abovementioned bus tour in early October 2019. Mr Adams works for Radio Wilcannia. He told us:

".....We have to rely on bottled water to bathe our babies. There is no fresh water to drink. The bore water is heavy and a dark colour. Our skin is dry, our hair is like straw. We are all living in Third World conditions. "We are facing a lot of trauma. In Wilcannia, we are facing high rates of depression and suicide. The average life expectancy is now 38 years. It used to be 56.5 years. For white Australia, it is some 84 years.

"Add to this the dispossession of our land, intergenerational trauma and genocide. We are really suffering."

Mr Adams told our group that the lack of water has had many indirect effects on the community – for example, it has stopped the women's football team playing as they cannot hose down the oval (that is, the ground is so hard that people cannot play football). He further explained the importance of football for the local youth. He told us "they [governments] have taken away our health, our culture, our dignity and our community".

Mr Adams reported his and colleagues' observations of kangaroos and emus dying in their hundreds if not thousands in the surrounding areas due to the drought, stating "We, the Traditional Owners, need help as the Government isn't going to stop. The big banks now control

our water. We have to stop water trading and put water back into the commons". It is my understanding from hearing Mr Adams - and Indigenous representatives in the other towns our group visited – experience and believe that consultation by politicians and bureaucrats is merely a "box-ticking exercise" and that decisions about (for example) water allocations have already been made elsewhere in a matter entirely opaque to the Indigenous communities.

This Inquiry therefore has the opportunity to rectify this omission by inviting Indigenous representatives from across drought-affected NSW communities to give evidence at the public hearings.

Influence of big business on water distribution

Regarding distribution of and access to water from the rivers, it seems to me that the rights and needs of Indigenous peoples are often subsumed under the rubric of "environmental flows". Rarely are their traditional ties to the water and land mentioned during the current crisis of drought. As Bruce Shillingsworth stated in a recent interview when asked for his view of the processes that have led to the depletion of waterways: "It's the over pumping of the water: the irrigation. The big irrigators are taking a lot of the water out of the river. And not letting the river run freely. As quick as the flood comes down and the rivers fill up, the quicker they pump it out."

He further stated:

"The government needs to make some proper policies. We've got to stop these big irrigators. We've got to put limits on how much water they're allowed to pump. We've got to make sure there's water there for our communities. And make sure small farmers get a portion of that. We need to look at the sharing of the water source. Not any particular group, but the big corporates are claiming our water systems. That's what we've got to stop". Ref:

<https://www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/blog/saving-the-rivers-from-corporates-an-interview-with-water-activist-bruce-shillingsworth/>.

In relation to the wider climate crisis facing all of Australia and in particular in the Murray-Darling catchment area, Mr Shillingsworth has noted it is an emergency. He recognises that:

"It's not just affecting First Nations people. It affects non-Indigenous people. But, First Nations peoples are getting the brunt of this, because 60 percent of our NSW population lives upon the river system – lives along the Murray-Darling. They spend most of their lives there. They rely on that water. They rely on that river as a food source. A lot of the sacred sites are along the river. A lot of stories and knowledge that Aboriginal people have relates to the water. They spend a lot of their recreation time along the river camping and fishing. What do they do now when there is no water in the river? (<https://www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/blog/saving-the-rivers-from-corporates-an-interview-with-water-activist-bruce-shillingsworth/>)

Summary

It is essential that impacts of the drought on First Nations people are considered across drought-affected NSW communities as a matter of priority. They are owed special consideration due the extraordinary pressures placed on their culture and indeed their very existence. The current drought conditions merely exacerbate the pressures and impacts they have endured since white settlement.

Further, I strongly believe this Inquiry must address and deal with the often ignored or sidelined influence of human-induced global warming (climate change) on the environment, exacerbating already challenging patterns of drought, flood and fire. Otherwise, this Inquiry risks simply offering temporary or superficial support without addressing the underlying causes of more frequent and worsening droughts.

Recommendations:

That:

1. Indigenous representatives must be included in any decision-making bodies (parliamentary/bureaucratic) before decisions are made about them. Indigenous representatives from among the worst affected towns should be called to present their evidence to the Inquiry in person and propose their own solutions to some of the situations which are impacting on their families and wider communities;
2. investigation be conducted into the need for indigenous cultural river flows outside of the context for environmental flows;

3. all relevant NSW Water Agreements be reviewed in light of the drought to consider those aspects not included in the original agreements. This includes the impacts of cotton farming and the big irrigators from the upper reaches onto the lower reaches of the Darling River;
4. serious inquiry into and consideration of establishing water (sewage) recycling plants in major regional towns be made with the aim of contributing to water supplies. Such a move would of course require a high level of recurrent government funding; and that 5. a separate inquiry be established into how current NSW landuse policies (eg increased land-clearing, coal and coal seam gas mining) are exacerbating already difficult conditions on the driest inhabited continent on earth – specifically addressing impacts of human-induced global warming and the consequent extreme climatic conditions especially drought, but also wildfires and floods.

Adrienne Shilling
27 November 2019