

## INQUIRY INTO A SUSTAINABLE WATER SUPPLY FOR SYDNEY

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**Date Received:** 19/01/2006

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**Subject:**

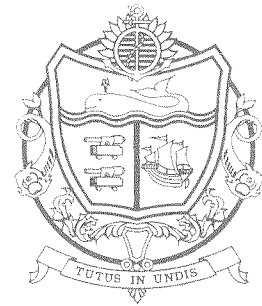
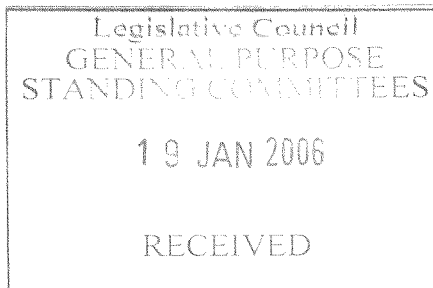
**Summary**

# MOSMAN MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

## OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

16 January 2006

Mr Ian Cohen MLC  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000



Dear Mr Cohen

The purpose of this letter is to outline Mosman Council's opposition to the construction of a desalination plant for Sydney. Such a plant will incur serious environmental costs and do nothing to develop more sustainable water management in Sydney.

In general, Mosman Council supports the position of the Sydney Coastal Councils Group which has already stated its public opposition to the construction of the plant.

We want a transparent decision making process over the future of Sydney's water supply, that seeks input from all levels and parts of government, and the community. Such a process should include all options for the future management of water in Sydney, including demand reduction through improved efficiency and reduction of waste, reuse, and recycling. This process must be undertaken before a poorly considered decision to build a desalination plant is committed.

Sydney Water has stated that the costs of desalination are less than those of other projects, such as water recycling. These costs have been questioned by water management experts, and a transparent discussion of costing needs to be undertaken.

In addition, the economic impacts of the decision must include both the financial cost of building and operating the scheme, as well as costs to the environment, the opportunity cost of investing and operating the proposed plant at the expense of other water supply systems, and any costs that will be borne by the future population of Sydney.

Many other investments could be made to secure Sydney's water supply in a more sustainable manner with lower environmental costs. Sydney receives higher rainfall than many other cities, however Sydney only recycles 3% of its water, and disposes of nearly 500 billion litres of wastewater to the oceans each year. Any sustainable water management option has to include recycled waste water to reduce, and make better use of, this waste stream.

We do not believe that sufficient effort has been made to assess the environmental impact of the proposed desalination plant, during both construction and operation.



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The environmental assessment information presented on Sydney Water's website is deficient because it does not adequately explore the environmental impacts of the proposed desalination plant when it operates.

Desalination is an energy intensive process and will significantly increase greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to the enhanced greenhouse effect, which is already forecast to make Australian rainfall patterns less predictable, and reduce fresh water availability by increasing evaporation. Exacerbating these impacts is not a sensible way to manage our city's future water supply.

The Government also needs to consider the role of education and water pricing structures in influencing community attitudes towards water. Already, we have seen how community education and less-than-onerous water restrictions have reduced water consumption. Ongoing changes in community attitudes, and increasing the availability of water saving devices and technology to the community can further reduce water consumption. The Government needs to invest significantly more in efficiency measures to reduce household and industry demand.

Instead of increasing water prices to pay for an unsustainable desalination plant, the NSW Government should be looking at equitable water charges that act as a disincentive for wasteful household consumption, with any additional revenue used to fund increased efficiency measures. Charges should clearly reflect water consumption, to give consumers an incentive to reduce water use.

Improving the scope and funding of education is an important element in changing attitudes towards water consumption and acceptance of recycled water for different uses. Education and awareness programs need to be improved: people are happy to make sustainable choices about water use when they understand the issues involved.

The role of local government is important, and the opinion of local government should be sought in any water planning process. The State Government has already acknowledged the important role that local government plays in water management, through its requirement for local governments to prepare water savings plans, even though local government accounts for a very small percentage overall water consumption in Sydney.

In recent years, the state government has spent over \$60M working with local councils to reduce the negative environmental impact of stormwater on our natural environment. Stormwater reuse – to stop treating stormwater as a waste, and use it as a valuable resource – is the logical extension of this program. Local governments in Sydney are already investigating alternative water supplies, such as stormwater harvesting for irrigation, and waste water reuse. Funding more of these programs would have the dual benefit of reducing damage to our environment, and saving thousands of litres of good quality water currently used to irrigate parks and ovals.

Construction of a desalination plant, and the manner in which its planning has been carried out, does not accord with the "Principles for managing Sydney's water supplies" as outlined in the Metropolitan Water Plan 2004 (p3) ...

*Minimise the risks of water shortages by diversifying sources of supply:*

Relying on desalination is not diversifying our sources of supply – the cost of constructing and operating the plant will inhibit the development of alternative, more cost effective options such as recycling and reuse.

*Adopt a partnership approach with the community:* The secrecy of planning for the desalination plant, and the use of non-transparent planning processes has been antithetical to the concept of community partnership

*Foster innovation:* Desalination is not an innovative response. The lack of interest shown by the Government in alternative solutions to our water supply is stifling innovation.

*Increase the efficient use of water:* Desalination does nothing to improve the current wasteful water use practices in Sydney, rather, it will perpetuate current inefficiencies and unsustainable water use patterns.

*Match the grade of water to its end use:* There are numerous opportunities to use recycled wastewater and stormwater for industrial, agricultural and open space purposes. Treatment and energy costs would be significantly less than a desalination plant.

*Optimise the use of existing infrastructure:* Reducing demand for expensively treated potable water supplies would ensure that the government would not need to invest in new dams, desalination plants, or reticulation systems. Building a desalination plant will only perpetuate current unsustainable water use patterns, and will not reduce the demand for new water infrastructure in the future.

*Appropriately target future infrastructure:* Desalination is not an appropriate investment in new infrastructure.

*Make decisions adaptively:* Adaptive decision making involves being flexible enough to incorporate new information and make decisions appropriate to changing circumstances. The Government's insistence on desalination, despite widespread community opposition, and expert opinion, shows that it is not undertaking adaptive decision making.

*Ensure actions are acceptable to the public, affordable, feasible and sustainable:*

Desalination is not acceptable to the public – it has already encountered widespread and informed opposition. Desalination is expensive financially, and can't be afforded environmentally. It is not a feasible, long term solution to Sydney's water needs. The failure of the Government to consult with the community, the failure to consider the immediate and long term environmental consequences, and the expectation that future generations will have to bear the costs of an unsustainable water supply, demonstrate that a desalination plant is not a sustainable option.

Yours sincerely,



(Councillor Denise Wilton)  
MAYOR