

**Submission  
No 62**

**INQUIRY INTO ADEQUACY OF WATER STORAGES IN  
NSW**

**Name:** Mr Graham Holt

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## **Submission to Standing Committee on State Development**

### **Inquiry into adequacy of water storage in NSW**

Dear Honourable Members

I wish to address Point (d) in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference "proposals for the construction and/ or augmentation of water storages in NSW with regard to storage efficiency, engineering feasibility, safety, community support and cost benefit,"

I write as a geotechnical engineer with more than 40 years experience, the most relevant for this submission being in design and construction of storages for coal tailings, safety of dams in relation to underground coal mine workings, and community support. From experience in EIS processes both assessing and writing them, and sitting on both sides of environmental inquiries I have considerable background in community consultation processes.

#### **Engineering Feasibility**

It is an oft stated fact that one can build anything if one throws enough money at it. I experienced this with the Tillegra Dam proposal announced in 2006 by the then Premier of NSW. According to files released through the Upper House it was one of several proposals put forward by Hunter Water in response to government requests for projects to fit a political agenda. The released files indicated that the proposal was announced with a minimum of engineering study. The cart was put before the horse. Herein is the first problem: Political agendas can take precedence over sound investigation.

The second problem is that the public servants proposing Tillegra Dam appeared not to have proposed it as a priority option for the Hunter/Central Coast but submitted meekly to the political agenda of the time, thus failing in their duty to provide fearless advice to the government. Three weeks before the announcement the Managing Director of Hunter Water assured the public via the Newcastle Herald that Tillegra Dam would not be needed for at least 30 years if at all.

The engineering feasibility was then contracted to another government department with a direct interest in dam construction. (The former Department of Public Works) This body was exempted from Freedom of Information legislation. Here is problem number 3. The engineering investigations were hidden from public scrutiny.

Why? I would suggest because there was already a community outcry by residents in the Dungog Shire. This was not expected by the government. Again FOI documents obtained through the Upper House revealed the former local MP advised the Premier that there would only be minor opposition "by tree huggers and blowins".

I was requested by an affected farmer to investigate the Tillegra Dam site by virtue of my past experience. I subsequently came to advise the No Tillegra Dam Group on geotechnical engineering matters related to the project. One engineer against the might of the NSW government! The cost became too great for the NTDG to bear so for 4 years the work was undertaken without charge. It was a difficult and messy process to try to keep aloof from the political attacks from as far up the chain as the relevant Ministers, political use of Hunter Water's peer review group, a secret attempt to obtain information about me via Wambo Mine, an attempt by the MD of Hunter Water to belittle and to intimidate my wife (a qualified geologist), while all the time trying to expose the likely escalating cost of constructing a dam at the Tillegra site. Clearly none of these things should be allowed to happen.

It was very clear to me from my initial geological observations that cost was going to be far greater than the government estimated. The government decided that the community would pay directly for the dam, but there was no cap on cost. One senior employee of Hunter Water even admitted to residents at a community consultative meeting that "we don't care if it costs a billion dollars". This for a dam cost announced at about a quarter of this figure in 2006.

A huge amount of public money was wasted trying to justify a political decision. The processes used by the government agencies involved in the Tillegra Dam investigations were clearly flawed yet touted as conforming to best practice and having clearance from a peer review group. Processes need to include transparent, truly independent advice and review, and be cleared perhaps by a body such as ICAC?

### **Safety**

I have had association with the Dams Safety Committee since the early 1980's through my work in the coal industry. The selection of committee members probably looked very straightforward and sensible following the Reynolds Inquiry (1975) but my observations over the years concluded it became very much "a boys' club" revolving around Public Works, Sydney Water, Hunter Water, SMEC and a few other experienced dam engineers. When one body had a proposal before the committee that body's representative exited a DSC meeting for that agenda item. It is in my view an out of date practice that encourages cronyism and is anything but transparent. A revision of the manner in which the DSC operates is requested. Tillegra Dam threw up an interesting safety issue.

Large dam proposals are supposed to undertake a dam break study. Hunter Water claimed this was not necessary because "it will build a safe dam". That statement beggared belief. Where was the DSC then?

### **Community Support**

The Tillegra Dam episode exposed the flaws in the community support process. When it was obvious that there was going to be considerable public outcry a "Community Consultative Committee" was established by Hunter Water. It clearly tried to "load" the committee with members favourable to its proposal. It was forced to accept a member of the No Tillegra Dam Group, and later discovered that another member was "anti-dam".

The manipulation of the committee meetings by Hunter Water became the stuff of legends.

As investigations and activism raised the cost issue, and the government belatedly acknowledged that rate payers would wear the cost of the dam, the local protest grew well beyond the borders of the Dungog Shire.

In the end the "treehuggers and blowins" gained considerable support and the government used the EIA process to withdraw the project. A community was split, the local economy suffered, and still does, and the mess still goes on.

It is clear that the model of public consultation adopted for the Tillegra Dam proposal was flawed. The first mistake was trying to rig the community consultation committee, another was Hunter Water trying to run its own publicity for the project. Its clear bias in my view resulted in serious damage to its credibility.

I have seen similar community consultative committees at work in the coal mining industry with highly variable success. Some are taken over by "professional" committee members, others are side tracked or treated in a token manner. The model is wrong in my view, and a better system of engaging the public needs to be developed.

I thank the Committee for taking the time to read this submission. I have not attached supporting documentation to back up details and quotes, as I only became aware of the Inquiry and submissions deadline in the last few days, and my records are archived. Without the Upper House FOI releases the public would have had a far greater challenge in trying to find out how the whole mess of Tillegra came about. This final comment says something about the need for better ways to engage the community in large projects. I can appear before the Committee and provide backup documentation if requested.

Yours Faithfully

Graham Holt Bsc(Hons) MEng Sci FAusIMM CP(Geol)