

INQUIRY INTO ADEQUACY OF WATER STORAGES IN NSW

Organisation: Tumut Shire Council

Date received: 15/10/2012

Thank you for accepting this late submission to the Inquiry into the adequacy of water storages in NSW. The issues that Council would like considered are detailed below.

Introduction

Tumut River has effectively acted as an irrigation channel since 1968 when Blowering Dam was completed. Controlled releases from Blowering Dam have drastically altered the natural flow regime of Tumut River, resulting in accelerated erosion and adverse impacts on the eco-system.

Regulated flows in the river have resulted in high river levels in summer, when the water is needed by downstream irrigators, and low river levels in winter when water is held back to top-up Blowering Dam.

Council accepts that Tumut River is a regulated stream, but management practices should be altered to minimise the impacts.

Flood Mitigation - Blowering Dam

Being located in the foothills of Kosciuszko National Park, Tumut Shire has a history of flash flooding. Unlike western areas that receive days and sometime weeks notice of flood warnings, Tumut Shire receives very little notice as there is a short lead time from when heavy rain in the catchment area reaches the shire. The State Flood Sub-Plan does not include Tumut River as a system that is subject to flood warnings; Council has requested that this be considered by the State Emergency Management Committee.

Tumut Shire experienced major flooding in October, 2010 and again in March, 2012. Both resulted in millions of dollars damage to public infrastructure and private property, and were declared natural disasters. The flood in March this year severely impacted on the Brindabella, Goobarragandra and Tumut Valleys. Flooding in the Tumut Valley was caused predominantly from water in the Goobarragandra River. Fortunately, there was some air-space in Blowering Dam that aided in flood mitigation. If Blowering Dam had been spilling at the time, this added water would have compounded the flood impact.

Blowering Dam is not managed for flood mitigation. Its primary purpose is to store water for release to the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.

Council and State Emergency Services would like to see Blowering Dam managed for flood mitigation. This would require the provision of some air space, at the expense of water storage, which could possibly be off-set by down-river storage. Council is aware that an investigation report was produced some years ago into down-river storage and suggests that this report be revisited.

Draw-down rate of Tumut River

During the irrigation season, Tumut River levels fluctuate enormously, based on the demand on irrigators. River flows vary from as low as 600 ML per day to 9,300 ML per day. This enormous variation generally occurs over a relatively short period of time, resulting in saturated river banks collapsing into the river. A more natural draw-down rate would allow excess water to drain from the banks and reduce the likelihood of banks collapsing.

It is Council's understanding that the current rule applied to draw-down in the Tumut River is 500 ML/day/hour. Council believes that a new draw-down rule should apply, based on water level not flow rate, such as occurs at Hume Dam, which Council believes is 150mm variation per day.

In May, 2011 the Tumut River Advisory Committee requested an investigation into draw-down rates in the Tumut River with the view of replicating natural rates. There has been no response to this request.

In July, 2011 the Honourable Katrina Hodgkinson, M.P. advised that the NSW Office of Water had been instructed to undertake a review of the Tumut River operations in regard to the rates of rise and fall, and that a report would be provided shortly. Fifteen months have passed and there has been no further advice on the matter.

Funding to implement the Tumut River Works Plan

The process of developing a Works Plan to mitigate erosion caused by the regulated flows commenced in 2005 when the State Government undertook a comprehensive review of environmental factors. This led to the development of a ten year Works Plan that was eventually approved by the then Minister for Water, Phillip Costa, in 2010/11.

The plan acknowledges that Tumut River is a major natural asset that is valued greatly by the community for its economic, environmental, aesthetic, social and recreational values. The plan recommended that \$1.8M be spent per year on works to mitigate erosion. The actual amount being spent is in the order of \$600,000 per year, well short of what is required.

Erosion mitigation works on the Tumut River are currently funded by the State Government (75%) and Snowy Hydro (25%).

Council believes that the NSW Office of Water has lodged submissions to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal on bulk rural water charges as a means of raising revenue to fund works on the Tumut River in accordance with the Works Plan.

Funding to implementation of the Works Plan should be significantly increased. Irrigators should be major contributors through bulk rural water charges.

Cold Water Pollution

The Tumut River Advisory Committee (TRAC) was formed in 1997 to provide a forum for communication between the State Government and other key stakeholders having an interest in the Tumut River. Council is a member of TRAC.

Water is fed into Tumut River from the base of Blowering Dam, resulting in extremely low water temperatures. Through TRAC, Council has expressed concern about the impacts of cold water releases on the Tumut River aquatic ecosystem. Cold water pollution has also severely restricted the use of Tumut River for recreational purposes.

Council acknowledges that the Government has developed a strategy to manage the impacts of cold water releases from State dams by investigating options for installing multi-level off-takes over the next 30 years. Blowering Dam has been identified as a priority for investigation in stage 2 but there has been no advice as to when the investigation will commence.

Summary

Council acknowledges the competing issues between the operation of Blowering Dam for water supply, electricity generation and the environment. However, inadequate consideration is given to the environment and flood mitigation. These issues should be investigated to achieve the optimal balance.

Operation of the dam may comply with the current legislative framework but Council maintains that the sale of water and electricity is done at the expense of the environment and flood mitigation.

In August, 2012 the Honourable Katrina Hodgkinson, M.P., advised that the Tumut River Works Plan is designed to cater for rates of rise and fall in river level. However, without adequate funding to implement the Plan, accelerated erosion is not being adequately addressed. The options are to increase funding or regulate flows to avoid accelerated erosion. At the moment, neither is happening.



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