

INQUIRY INTO A SUSTAINABLE WATER SUPPLY FOR SYDNEY

Organisation: Coast and Wetlands Society Inc.
Name: Ms Ellen O'Brien
Position: Vice President
Telephone:
Date Received: 30/01/2006

Subject:

Summary



COAST & WETLANDS SOCIETY INCORPORATED

P.O. Box A225, Sydney South, NSW 1235
A.B.N 84 775 415 708

Chair of the Legislative Council General Purpose Committee No. 5
NSW Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney. NSW. 2000

gpscno5@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Chair,

**Re: Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.5
Inquiry into a sustainable water supply for Sydney**

The Coast and Wetlands Society Inc welcomes the opportunity of making a submission to the Inquiry into a sustainable water supply for Sydney.

Before addressing the terms of reference of the Inquiry we would point out that there is a need to ensure that all communities have access to a sustainable water supply.

With population trends along the coast we would suggest that there are other areas with serious water supply problems, including the Central Coast and Coffs Harbour regions. Any attempts to secure sustainability for Sydney should not be at the expense of sustainability in other regions, such as the Shoalhaven and South Coast.

Terms of reference

a. The environmental impact of the proposed desalination plant at Kurnell.

Even though an EIS has been placed on public display there are still many aspects of the proposal which are being designed – including the inlet and outlet structures and the pipeline connection from the plant to the metropolitan supply network. As such it is not possible to be certain as to the impacts of the proposal.

b. The environmental assessment process associated with the proposed desalination plant.

The proposal is being assessed under the new Part 3A of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act. As such it carries an assumption of approval, provides no avenue for appeal and by passes the formal requirements of other legislation. As explained under a) the assessment will be of a proposal which is far from complete.

Given statements by the Premier and Ministers to the effect that approval is a foregone conclusion, one questions the purpose of the assessment process, and whether there is any point to public submission.

We note that the proposal has been placed on public display over the Christmas-New Year period – the oldest trick in the developer's book (we acknowledge that the display period has been longer than the minimum, but it still coincides with the main holiday period).

c. Methods for reducing the use of potable water for domestic, industrial commercial and agricultural purposes, including sustainable water consumption practices.

Reduction in water use must include education, pricing mechanisms and incentives, but also requires a change in philosophy. The business model applied by successive governments by which Sydney Water's income is based on selling water, and where the result is regarded by government as a cash-cow to support the state budget without providing sufficient funds for maintenance and investment.

Agriculture is still a major industry in the Sydney region, particularly the production of horticultural crops. Irrigation technologies exist for the minimization of water use, and these should be adopted. This will require education of producers – and resource material will need to be available in a range of community languages. However, the bigger threat to sustainability of water use in Sydney will come from the continuing loss of prime agricultural land in development.

In terms of growing plants there is a continuing need for the promotion of more water use efficient gardens – including both better design and choice of plants.

d. The costs and benefits of desalination and alternative sources of water including recycled waste water groundwater, rainwater tanks and stormwater harvesting.

The desalination plant is a very expensive investment, and will in addition be a major cause of increased greenhouse gas emissions. However, if the plant is constructed then we are concerned by suggestions that it would operate only intermittently. Our understanding of the membrane technology is that such an approach would seriously shorten the plants' life.

Any sustainable strategy will need to employ a diversity of approaches, including greater wastewater recycling, rainwater tanks and stormwater harvesting. Use of groundwater will also play a role, but we need to make sure that any use is not greater than the recharge so that we are not unsustainably mining the resource.

The Coast and Wetlands Society does not support the view that water that flows to the sea is wasted. The mixing of salt and freshwater in estuaries is an essential driver of the ecology of estuaries. One of the consequences of the development of Sydney has been that water that would have originally flowed into the Hawkesbury River has been diverted to ocean outfalls at North Head, Bondi and Malabar. Certainly we can make greater use of stormwater, but consideration should be given to redesigning the drainage network so as to get closer to the prior condition. This will not be quickly achieved, but it is a goal that we could set.

e. Practices concerning the disposal of trade waste.

Encouragement (through charges and incentives) should be given to minimizing the discharge of trade waste, and there should be more research on the developing of recycling and re-use strategies for a greater range of wastes.

As far as possible, minimal amounts of tradewaste should be permitted to enter the sewerage network and mix with domestic waste.

f. The tender process and contractual arrangements, including public-private partnerships, in relation to the proposed desalination plant.

These are matters outside the Society's competence to comment.

g. Any other relevant matters.

Sydney's water use will be heavily influenced by the amount, location and type of development which is to be permitted. The sustainability and security of the water supply will need to be a much greater consideration in the development of the metropolitan strategy. The fact that we are currently experiencing what is perceived as a 'crisis' is a sorry indictment of years of failure to address the issues of Sydney's development.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Ellen O'Brien', written in a cursive style.

Ellen O'Brien
Vice President
ellen.obrien@envirostrategy.com.au