Submission No 77

INQUIRY INTO ADEQUACY OF WATER STORAGES IN NSW

Name: Name suppressed

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(SUMMARY)

I do not believe that the construction of new dams is the best solution to provide for the increasing water needs of a community, agriculture and industry. Dams destroy native vegetation that provides much needed wildlife habitat and adversely affect the river's natural eco system. Dams pose an acceptable threat to residents downstream of the dam. There are more cost effective and ecologically friendly ways of water capture and storage. This submission will cover issues as they apply to the Tweed Shire, but they relate to any proposed dam.

The Tweed Shire water supply is served by Clarrie Hall Dam. CHD has the capacity to supply water needs to Tweed Shire up to the year 2035. Alternatives to dams for water capture and storage are available for example, rainwater tanks. With increased technology in power supply, perhaps from solar power or wave action, a desalination plant would be an option. Also, the community needs to focus on a decrease in demand. In the Tweed Shire, as a result of an education campaign and an incentive program run by the council, urban consumption has decreased. More can be achieved. Financial incentives can make recycled water a more viable alternative.

Current land management practices have resulted in loss of productivity of the soil. Farming techniques can be improved to lessen the need for large on site dams. For example, permaculture and the planting of vegetation that encourages the retention of moisture and reduces erosion and salinity problems.

Water should be prioritised for human consumption. On no account should dam water be used for heavy industry such as mining. Cutting the subsidy to the industry (by way of cheap water prices) will result in more economic use of water. The high water demands and toxic chemicals used in the hydraulic fracturing process by Coal Seam Gas Mining make it incompatible with domestic supply. CSG companies should not operate unless they can safely store their waste water. Under no circumstances should CSG companies be permitted to dump excess so-called 'produced water' into town sewerage systems. As was the case recently when Metgasco released water that was in danger of overflowing holding ponds into the sewerage system of Richmond Valley Council.

Dams create an artificial ecosystem dominated by exotic species. They provide a breeding ground for pests such as water weeds and carp at the expense of native flora and fauna. Water released from environmental flows can have negative downstream effects due to high toxins caused by rotting vegetation. Water released from the bottom of the dam is very cold and lacking in oxygen and can kill fish immediately downstream.

Actual implementation of environmental flow is not always as intended. Witness the poor management of Wivenhoe dam during the recent flooding crisis. Anyone who has seen the pathetic state of the once mighty Snowy River cannot help but be deplored by what the lack of environmental flow does to a river. Even with legislation to return water to the river, below the Jindabyne dam, the river currently receives about one half of what is considered to be the bare minimum flow required for a healthy river.

Other serious problems have arisen from the storage of large volumes of water. The 1998 outbreak of cryptosporidium and giardia in Warragamba Dam caused considerable inconvenience to a large number of people. The Aswan dam in Egypt holds back so much sediment that the Nile Delta is being eroded by the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the lack of the annual fertile silt deposit has caused farmers to rely on expensive artificial fertilisers. In the US, agricultural dams built in the twentieth century, are being decommissioned in order to return health and native fish stocks to the river.

After clean air, fresh water is our most immediate need. Dams create a dependence on a centralised infrastructure to supply water needs. Apart from the risk of a catastrophic failure of the dam, there is also the disadvantage of this 'one size fits all' approach. It is incredulous water used for flushing the toilet, watering the garden or washing is treated to the same high standard as drinking water. The ideal situation would be to have dual reticulation. Thereby, only drinking water would pass through the treatment plant. An example of a problem arising from relying on a centralised supply of water can be shown by from a recent calamity at the brand new, upwards of thirty million dollars, Tweed Water Treatment Plant. Inexplicably the pumps failed and could not be fixed. The machinery was so specialised that replacements could not be readily found. When water was finally restored, there was only a day or so supply of treated water left.

Of particular concern is the spectre of a dam being built in the Tweed Valley on Byrrill Creek. The proposed dam storage area harbours many threatened species and lies adjacent to World Heritage areas and is an important wildlife corridor. Tweed Shire Council set aside land for the purpose of a dam some 40 years ago when dam building was favourably considered. Nowadays the awareness of the problems associated with dams is much greater and opposition to the dam is steadily growing in the community. However, construction of said dam is being promoted by parties with vested interests.

If we increase population without a sustainable water policy, future generations will suffer the consequences. It is in the interests of everyone to decrease our reliance on dams to supply our water needs. Therefore, I propose that this committee actively explores every avenue possible for the current and future needs of society.