

**Submission
No 280**

INQUIRY INTO ACCESS RESTRICTIONS TO PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERWAYS

Organisation: Goulburn Mulwaree Council

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Subject: Submission – Select Committee on Access Restrictions to Public Lands and Waterways

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Access Restrictions to Public Lands and Waterways in NSW.

Goulburn Mulwaree Council covers an area of 3,223 square kilometres making it approximately 1.5 times the size of the Australian Capital Territory. The Goulburn Mulwaree Local Government Area (LGA) has a total population of approximately 30,000. Council provides water and sewer services to the city of Goulburn and the Marulan township. Goulburn services an equivalent population of around 28,000, while Marulan is smaller with an equivalent population of around 1000.

Council notes that many types of public land are included in this enquiry, including water catchment areas. Council notes that many water utilities across New South Wales (including Goulburn Mulwaree Council) are required to provide safe and reliable drinking water to its residents, which includes the management of water sources and water catchments. This ensures that the risk of poor-quality water being pumped into drinking water supplies is reduced, and is a key aspect of Council's Drinking Water Management System as required under Section 25 of the *Public Health Act 2010*.

Council would like to highlight the following regarding the proposed terms of reference:

- a) the current and projected extent and rationale of access restrictions across public lands, including the balance between environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation and public access

Council notes that the term of reference above should also include other reasons restrictions are in place, such as public health and protection of water catchments. Council manages its water catchments as much as possible to reduce the risk of a contamination event. This in effect protects residents who consume the water. The term of reference above should focus on the passive stakeholders, and indirect consequences, of the restrictions in place.

- b) the social, economic and recreational impacts of access restrictions on local communities, recreational users and industries such as tourism, forestry and agriculture

Council notes that the term of reference above focuses on direct impacts of these restrictions but should also focus on the indirect impacts and the impacts felt if these restrictions are relaxed and an incident occurs. Council supplies water to over 12,000

connections and approximately 29,000 residents and a key part of this is the management of its water supply catchments.

Water quality incidents occur across Australia due to poor quality water reaching residents and can have severe consequences. Pathogens such as *Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia* can cause severe health effects on residents such as diarrhoea, stomach cramps and vomiting (and even death in some people). During a water quality incident water utilities usually need to take drastic action such as flushing or dumping large volumes of water or overtime to staff working around the clock to rectify the issue, and trucking or training in water from other areas or supplying bottled water to ensure residents can still drink the water. These are expensive stop gap solutions that can drain already strained funds.

Residents too are impacted by having to boil their water or limiting the amount of water they use. A key long term consequence is the reduction in trust that residents have in the water utility and the water they're supplied.

These are all consequences that need to be considered when assessing the implications of relaxing restrictions. Although there are opportunities to do so, the risk of an issue occurring can often outweigh the benefits.

- c) the adequacy of government investment in maintaining and improving public access and infrastructure on public lands

Council supports this term of reference being included. Council has limited resources to manage and maintain 2 declared dams, 2 raw water pump stations, two water treatment plants and water infrastructure to supply drinking water to over 12,000 customers. Allowing public access to water catchments would result in Council managing access to ensure infrastructure and waterways are not damaged or vandalised. This would stretch existing resources, resulting in Council either reducing services elsewhere within its water supply or increasing rates to accommodate the additional expenses.

It should also be noted that vandalism should be included as a key expense when considering opening public land to further access. Many existing facilities experience vandalism, and with the areas in question likely to be in remote or rural areas the likelihood of items being damaged increases. This is then a further expense borne by the asset and land owners (often Councils) to repair and protect these areas and assets.

- d) the legislative and regulatory frameworks governing access restrictions, including any inconsistencies, gaps, or areas for improvement

Council notes that all legislative and regulatory requirements should be included for assessment, including passive requirements such as the management of catchments for drinking water supplies. Council manages its catchments to ensure they are protected as much as possible as part of its risk management under its Drinking Water Management System. Required by all water utilities in New South Wales under Section 25 of the *Public Health Act 2010*, it ensures the risk of water contamination is reduced as much as reasonably possible before water is pumped to a treatment plant.

The review of legislative and regulatory frameworks appears to be in the context of recreational use of land, however it needs to be considered why these areas are not open to public access and what requirements are in place to ensure this continues to be the case.

- e) the impact of restrictions on diverse user groups, including people with disabilities, Aboriginal communities and rural populations

Council notes that this term of reference focuses on user groups, however there should be a focus on other stakeholders such as surrounding landholders and water utility customers. Council's water supply catchments are often protected as much as possible to reduce the risk of contamination. This means that there is little to no activity within these catchments. This is valued by surrounding landholders who live in these areas as they're peaceful and quiet, but also ensures that the water supply is protected, ensuring water utility customers are protected from potential contamination events. This term of reference focuses on the groups who may utilise the land in question and ignores stakeholders who may also be impacted.

- f) the role of state and local government authorities and any other relevant entities, in managing and enforcing access restrictions on public lands, and

As Council manages its water supplies and corresponding catchments it would be expected that any additional responsibilities created from allowing public access to water supply catchments would fall to Council to manage and fund. Without funding supplied by state or federal government, Council would need to allocate already strained finances to managing these additional responsibilities, which would result in Council either reallocating existing funds and resources or imposing higher rates on residents already dealing with cost-of-living pressures. Even simple tasks such as supplying and maintaining recreational infrastructure such as picnic tables and barbeques would involve regular inspections and vandalism repair which are activities Council's currently do not have the necessary funds for.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. Council will be keen to further participate in the following stages of this review.

Yours faithfully

Tony Stevens
Acting Director Utilities