

WENTWORTH GROUP

OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS

Mr Peter Cosier, Prof Tim Flannery FAA, Dr Ronnie Harding FEIANZ, Dr Terry Hillman AM,
Prof Lesley Hughes, Prof David Karoly, Dr Jamie Pittcock, Prof Hugh Possingham FAA, Mr Robert Purves AM,
Dr Denis Saunders AM, Ms Anna Skarbek, Prof Bruce Thom AM, Mr Martijn Wilder AM.

Tuesday, 18 April 2017

SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION ON THE NATIONAL WATER REFORM ISSUES PAPER

Australia has been widely regarded as an international leader in water management in recent decades. Largely as a result of the reforms introduced through the 2004 National Water Initiative, water is now used more efficiently in both urban and rural settings; finances of water agencies have improved; some of the over-allocation of surface and groundwater systems has been addressed; a market has been introduced that gives water users much greater choice; institutional structures are now more transparent; and water law is more comprehensive and consistent in most jurisdictions.

At a time when Australia should be reaping the benefits of the 2004 National Water Initiative, water reform has lost momentum and, in many jurisdictions, is in decline. The National Water Commission that was established to lead the 2004 reforms, was abolished in 2014 and the Council of Australian Governments Standing Council on Environment and Water, the peak body for coordinated government action on water reform, has also ceased.

A core commitment of the National Water Initiative was to “complete the return of all currently overallocated or overused systems to environmentally-sustainable levels of extraction”. Over the past 12 months, the Wentworth Group has conducted a review of progress on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. While progress has been made in some areas, water recovery under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan has stalled and there is a risk of failure to redress overallocation in the Basin. Getting the Basin Plan back on track is central to the completion of the National Water Initiative.

Water will always be a scarce resource in Australia. Current discussion of the progress on national water reform provides the opportunity to take a long view and prepare this country for future pressures on water resources including droughts and a changing climate.

Accompanying this letter is a submission on the future of Australia’s water reform. It sets out the incomplete National Water Initiative reforms from 2004 and emerging priorities requiring reform.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Cosier

On behalf of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists