



Sustainable Population Australia Inc.

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Submission in response to Productivity Commission's Issues Paper for National Water Reform Inquiry

Dear Commissioners,

Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) is a nationally-based environment group and Registered Environment Organisation. Amongst our objectives are the following:

- To contribute to public awareness of the limits of Australian population growth from ecological, social and economic viewpoints.
- To promote awareness that the survival of an ecologically sustainable population depends on its renewable resource base.
- To promote urban and rural lifestyles and practices that are in harmony with the realities of the Australian environment, its resource base and its biodiversity.

We note the Commission's approach is two-pronged, looking at where we are now and considering future reform initiatives. Our submission considers future reform initiatives. It is from the standpoint of the above objectives that we submit the following points:

Population numbers dictate water demand. Since Australia's future population is at the discretion of federal government policy¹, by default population policy is water security policy.

The Productivity Commission's analysis should include population sensitivity analysis. If different population assumptions are not compared, then the enormous impact population growth has on future water demand will be obscured. Consequently, the government's most powerful long-term water security lever would be ignored.

In comparing different future population scenarios, both zero net migration and historically 'normal' levels such as 50,000-70,000 per year should be included, not just small variations around current policy settings².

¹ Australia's population growth is currently comprised of 45% natural increase and 55% from net overseas migration. In recent times those figures have been 40% and 60% respectively. Both natural increase (fertility) and migration are strongly influenced by federal government policy choices.

² Current net migration is approximately 182,000 p.a. (see ABS 3412.0 – Migration Australia)

The Productivity Commission's analysis should highlight the energy dependence, and consequent cost and vulnerability, of using desalination to allow urban demand to grow beyond the capacity of natural catchments.

The Productivity Commission's analysis should highlight trade-offs between environmental flows, agricultural needs and urban consumption.

The majority of Australia's freshwater is used for food production. Australia has finite capacity to sustainably extract freshwater for irrigation and a finite land area suitable for rain-fed agriculture, hence Australia has a finite food supply. This has strict implications in terms of our ultimate population level.

- If our population stabilises at 50 million (the current high-migration trajectory), we will be importing some of our food (rather than exporting a lot of our food), or – if there is insufficient food available globally to import – we will face food shortages similar to those faced in low-income, food-import dependent countries today.
- If our population stabilises at under 30 million (with migration closer to historical levels), we should be able to remain, on balance, self-sufficient in food (subject to other sustainability factors affecting our agriculture systems in terms of soil, energy, nutrient inputs and biodiversity).

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion. It is vital that the Productivity Commission consider the links between population numbers and water demand.

Yours sincerely

Hon. Sandra Kanck
National President
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