

National Water Initiative – Submission

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Introduction

I welcome this opportunity to comment on the National Water Initiative. It is wonderful to see, and not before time, that the states, territories, and Commonwealth governments are prepared to work together to shepherd our continent's most precious resource – water.

It is most encouraging for the country's future to see the commitment of federal environment Minister Tanya Plibersek to this initiative and the findings of the Commission following this information gathering effort.

Here in the Northern Territory we are already seeing the impacts of climate change on our water sources – the wet season is not nearly so wet this year or last year as it was in previous years. It also a huge concern for us as Territorians to see regular and ongoing reports of the lack of clean potable water for our indigenous peoples. We risk being seen as a third world territory in a first world country that cannot provide clean water to all its citizens.

Threats Facing the Ongoing Supply of Fresh, Clean Water within the Northern Territory

The 2017 initiative, the Strategic Aboriginal Water Reserve (SAWR)¹, legislating specific reserves to indigenous groups was criticised in 2020 as “insufficient to achieve water justice²”. Academic researchers in 2021 noted that, “Regressive changes to Northern Territory water laws could undermine Indigenous rights³.”

A policy brief prepared in 2022 by *The Water Justice Hub And Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council* noted that in terms of water extraction practices across all of northern Australia, “Local and regional people and communities are traded off with little consideration of cumulative impacts, climate science, sustainable environmental limits, temperature and rainfall changes, or sea level rises⁴”.

More recently, the *Georgina Wiso Water Allocation Plan*⁵ released by NT government in November last year “breaches the National Water Initiative⁶,” according to Professor Sue Jackson from Griffith University. The National Water Initiative (NWI) states that there should be “inclusion of Indigenous representation in water planning wherever possible” and water plans will “incorporate indigenous social, spiritual and customary objectives and strategies for achieving these objectives wherever they can be developed⁷”.

It can only be hoped that through further efforts and legislation affecting the National Water Initiative can address these inconsistencies and the threats from climate change and industrial activity to the ongoing supply of potable water to all Northern Territorians.

¹ https://denr.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/457553/SWRC-Policy-Framework_A4_V1.pdf

² <https://doi.org/10.1080/07900627.2021.1882406>

³ <https://theconversation.com/regressive-changes-to-northern-territory-water-laws-could-undermine-indigenous-rights-166561>

⁴ https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/280411/3/IWR%20Report_FINAL_2022_WJH_MFRC.pdf

⁵ https://nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1285518/georgina-wiso-implementation-actions.pdf

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-14/nt-water-plan-released-georgina-wiso-oil-gas-cotton-sectors/103099618>

⁷ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/sitecollectiondocuments/water/indigenous-engagement.pdf>