



# Sustainable Population Australia Inc.

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## **Submission in response to the Draft Report of the National Water Reform Inquiry**

On 21 August 2020, Sustainable Population Australia made a submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into National Water Use Reform (NWUR). Its salient recommendation was:

*The most immediate and effective initiative – and certainly the only one with genuine longer-term efficacy – that the Commission could propose in pursuit of water security would be a reduction in, and then a cessation of, Australia’s population growth.*

Sustainable Population Australia is disappointed to find that the Draft Report fails to include the option of limiting further population growth as a water security strategy.

The variety of human water needs (residential, agriculture, industry, indigenous etc) cannot be reconciled with those of a diverse, and robust natural environment when deliberately placed in competition with an ever-growing human population and ever-growing human needs. The diversity and abundance of Australia’s natural environment is already seriously diminished because of human activity.

Unless offset by little or no population growth, the anticipated scale of climate change will ensure any reforms proposed by the Commission to the National Water Initiative (NWI) will largely be ineffective.

SPA refers the Commission to the recent comments by the chair of the Murray Darling Basin Authority, Sir Angus Houston on CSIRO water flow projections:<sup>1</sup>

*The most probable scenario is that average annual streamflow in 30 years’ time will be up to 30 per cent less than what we see today, due to a 10 per cent reduction in rainfall.*

All species and ecosystems have inherent value, regardless of perceived usefulness to humans. We have a duty to minimise human impacts on natural ecosystems. A brief that assumes endless human population growth and a perpetual encroachment on the natural landscape does not meet this obligation.

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<sup>1</sup> Sydney Morning Herald, 10 March 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-single-most-important-resource-underpinning-australia-s-food-security-is-under-threat-20210309-p57953.html>

SPA is particularly concerned by the following statement in the Draft Report:

*The reality is that Australians will need to become even more adept at dealing with drought, and communities, industries and the **environment will have to adapt to lower water availability** and more uncertainty.*

This extraordinary statement assumes 'the environment' has the same facility of human beings to plan and pro-actively adapt to water scarcity. In combination with pressures imposed by climate change and human encroachment, species other than our own are apt to merely diminish and die. The environment is not just another discrete entity; it is the ecological underpinning of humanity's continued existence. If ecosystems are undermined or destroyed through lack of water, human well-being is also compromised.

The Draft Report states:

*Looking ahead, climate change and population growth present significant risks to the security of Australia's water resources.*

Despite frequent references in the Draft Report to the challenges posed by population growth, nowhere is it acknowledged that this growth is avoidable and occurs at the discretion of the Federal government through its control of immigration and its promotion of higher birth rates. The Commission has noted the impacts of a growing human population on water availability yet has failed to suggest any initiatives to counter it.

This omission is all the more disappointing considering the Commission's strong recommendations on population policy in its 2016 report on *Migrant intake into Australia*. That report also modelled multiple population growth scenarios depending on different levels and rates of Net Overseas Migration, and acknowledged that population growth would inevitably lead to higher costs for urban water (p. 231).

The Commission in its 2021 Draft Report opted for a single point population projection of an additional 11 million in capital cities by 2050, rather than providing a range of projections, as was done in the Commission's 2017 report on water reform. This failure is all the more disconcerting since Covid-19 is having an impact on Australia's population growth thus providing an opportunity for a reset to a lower growth level – which, based on available public opinion data, would be widely welcomed by the Australian public.

The final 2021 NWUR report should provide a range of population projections, including options of zero growth and very low growth and their impact on water demand.

A reduction in population growth – or an end to it – is by far the most powerful and amenable weapon in the armoury of measures to combat future water risks. It must not be ignored. While the Federal Government continues to heedlessly advocate population growth it is not necessary for the Productivity Commission to concur with silence in its recommendations.

SPA proposes the final NWUR report should acknowledge and reflect the following:

1. That the most effective and efficacious initiative the Productivity Commission could propose would be a recommendation to the Federal Government for a reduction in – and thereafter the cessation of – Australia’s population growth.
2. That there is a link between water policy and population policy. Future population growth should be framed as a policy choice, not an inevitability. The Commission should avoid imprecise descriptions such as ‘increasing challenges from population growth and climate change’. In this instance the message implied is that such challenges are surmountable, when they are clearly not. A perpetually growing population is simply incompatible with water security.
3. That whatever technology and management mechanisms are deployed, water security will become increasingly precarious as Australia’s population increases. In view of the likelihood of multiple disruptive events during this century due to climate, geopolitical and ecosystem crises, a precautionary approach is essential.
4. Trade-offs between environmental flows, urban use, industry and agriculture will increasingly threaten the viability of annual irrigated cropping – a major income-earner for Australia, but by necessity the lowest priority when water is scarce. The only way to maintain broad-acre irrigated cropping in Australia is to limit demand growth in other sectors, particularly urban consumption.
5. Energy intensive ‘solutions’ such as desalination expose future communities to increased vulnerability through their dependence on costly, complex, high-input systems to deliver water. These are not solutions, they are symptoms of failure.
6. To assist government with considering point 1 above, we recommend the Commission should model the impact of different population growth scenarios on water demand, their implications for future infrastructure costs and their impacts on water availability for other sectors (e.g., environment, agriculture).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to your inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Hon. Sandra Kanck  
National President