

National Water Reform inquiry
Productivity Commission
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Thank you for the opportunity comment to this Inquiry. I have participated in water reform since the mid 1990s.

In my opinion the past 5-10 years has seen the dismantling of many previous years of good water policy development that was in the long term public interest. From my perspective principles-based planning has been torn asunder by bipartisan support for large resource extraction projects and to further the business interests of politically well-connected individuals as the expense of all other users.

One of incoming Prime Minister Tony Abbott's first acts was to abolish numerous standing committees reporting to COAG. It is significant that the list included the Standing Committee on Environment and Water but not the Standing Committee on Energy & Resources. This gave a very clear indication of where government priorities lay and subsequent approvals for water guzzling mines and gas fields are compelling evidence of government intentions to mine the frack out of Australia at any price to its environment and with scant regard for the right and entitlements of existing water users, local and regional businesses and many regional communities – especially those dependent on groundwater.

I made a detailed submission on the 2009 NWI triennial assessment with a focus on the need for water quality objectives and the loopholes afforded to the mining sector under NWI Clause 34 to be closed. I have attached a copy FYI. I acknowledge that there has been some progress such as the inclusion of Environmental Flow Objectives and Water Allocation Security Objectives in Qld's Water Plans; but managing Climate Change impacts isn't adequately considered and effective statutory protection for water quality still seem to be a distant dream. There is also considerable room to improve the transparency and equity of water trading which should involve more checks and balances on water traders and agencies

My 2009 concerns remain at least as valid today as they were 8 years ago, and in some cases far greater. The approval of Adani's Carmichael Mine and the incremental development of unconventional gas projects across the Great Artesian Basin are squandering millions of dollars of public and private investment in GABSI cap and pipe programs that not only saved water but also pressure – a significantly under-valued attribute of the GAB resource.

The GAB is now understood to be a declining resource, not in a steady state as previously assumed (IESC, CSIRO). The focus now needs to be on managing it as a finite source of clean water. However, the Queensland covering is committed to giving unlimited volumes to the resources sector, at no charge and with no recognition of the prior rights of other users. There is absolutely nothing equitable nor sustainable about this ridiculous approach.

The dismantling of the National Water Commission has resulted in the loss of independent scrutiny and oversight of state water plans. The new Qld water planning framework means information is now spread across 3 and sometimes 4 separate documents. The system is now overly complex and confusing, perhaps deliberately so to minimise community engagement and the number of quality submissions received during the process.

I hold grave concerns that the next generation of Water Plans in Qld and NSW may not comply with the National Water Initiative nor the Murray Darling Basin. I leave it to others to comment on whether similar concerns are relevant to the implementation of the Basin Plan in other MDB States.

I was a member of the MDBA's Northern Basin Advisory Committee for 4 years. I understand NSW will now use a 2 tier document system and have heard rumors that NSW will only provide the high level over-arching document relevant to each MDB valley to the MDBA for Basin Plan accreditation purposes. Having witnessed first hand NSW lack of support for the MDBA and an apparent goal of completely undermining the spirit and intent of the MDB Plan, I believe it is essential that ALL planning documents need to be submitted so that the detail can be reviewed by the MDBA – and the CEWH – for Basin Plan accreditation purposes. NSW has made it very clear that it refuses to change Barwon Darling WSP rules to protect environmental water purchased in upstream tributaries. Frankly, in my opinion, NSW is not to be trusted with ensuring environmental water owned by the CEWH and paid for by Australian taxpayers is used to meet MDB Plan targets and objectives. In other words, NSW is sanctioning water theft.

I have also attached my submission on the Barwon Darling Water Plan 'Status & Issues' paper for your further reading.

There is a huge amount of burnout amongst those who engage in water reform processes. I would like to think that the next iteration will get it right. Australia urgently needs a national, principles-based approach to water planning and management that protects ecosystems in the long term and which treats all users fairly and with respect.

Yours sincerely,