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# The future of water reform in Australia — starting a conversation

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## Introduction

After 2 decades of cooperative governmental reforms on water, Australia established a world-leading hybrid governance system involving top-down regulation, water markets and water planning with stakeholder cooperation. Yet, with the abolition of the National Water Commission (NWC) in 2015,<sup>1</sup> there is a growing belief that Australia may have “dropped the ball on water”.<sup>2</sup> As the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists affirmed in 2014, “it appears that our Australian governments are walking away from strategic water reform at the very time when we should be preparing for the next inevitable drought”.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, there are few signs that this situation is improving. Since the passing of the Basin Plan 2012 (Cth) and the breaking of the millennium drought, there has been little detailed intergovernmental direction about the next steps in Australia's water law and governance journey.<sup>4</sup> It is increasingly unclear how resilient Australia's water reform blueprint (the National Water Initiative) will be in the face of shifting political agendas, growing complexity, reform fatigue, shrinking public resources at state levels and the absence of an independent oversight body like the NWC.

It is paramount that Australia maintains “good” water law and governance given that the next few decades will see major increases in Australia's population and food production (both dependent on water), as well as likely water scarcity due to droughts and climate change.<sup>5</sup> Further, even if support for the National Water Initiative (NWI) were to continue, it is likely that major law and policy reforms will still be needed if the Coalition government's 2015 White Paper vision of developing northern Australia's water resources is to be fully realised.<sup>6</sup>

At this critical juncture, it is both significant and timely to examine the challenges and future direction of Australia's water reforms. In light of these concerns, in December 2015, the Faculty of Law and the Connected Waters Initiative Research Centre at UNSW Australia hosted a group of water law specialists to consider the key successes and limits of Australia's hybrid water governance system, as well as to explore how best to steer water governance towards a more sustainable future path.

At the conclusion of the workshop, it was apparent that although Australia has come a long way in water management under the NWI, the design and implementation of this national reform does not appear sufficient to meet future water challenges. Further reforms and changes will be required and we believe the following 10 priorities should be considered and addressed by governments, civil society and industries if we are to achieve a sustainable water future for Australia.

## 1. Regulate the market to ensure equity, enhance efficiency and protect the environment

To date, most attention and resources have been focussed on water policy reforms at the national and state levels, in particular the establishment of cap and trade market systems based on sustainable yields. There has been insufficient attention and resources directed towards the implementation of this “top down” policy approach on the ground. Educating water users so that they understand the importance of complying with extraction limits and enforcing laws where breaches occur will help to provide a level playing field, to build confidence in market systems and improve outcomes for the community and the environment alike.<sup>7</sup> Licence transfers should be more closely regulated with a view to mitigating secondary impacts on other water users

and on ecosystems, and so that increases in the consumptive portion of the former and new use are avoided.<sup>8</sup> This will in turn increase trust among users and help avoid unintended consequences. While national compliance frameworks have led to improved action,<sup>9</sup> the federal funding for these reforms is coming to an end and the gains will be squandered if further action is not taken.

## 2. Extend metering, monitoring and accounting

There is substantial technology to improve telemetered metering, monitoring and data collection across multiple scales. While the Bureau of Meteorology and recent national and state metering policies have made significant strides,<sup>10</sup> a renewed and extended policy and implementation effort in this area would improve on-farm water management, facilitate assessment of equivalence between prior and new uses in transfers (above), enhance compliance and enforcement while reducing market transaction costs, and provide much more robust and reliable information to assist with better strategic decision making, water efficiency infrastructure reforms<sup>11</sup> and water planning (see below).<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Going beyond the limits of the market, especially for managing groundwater

While the use of a cap and trade market approach is a major achievement in the management of water in Australia, it is not without its challenges. These include limited trading in areas outside the Murray Darling Basin, minimal trading in groundwater, and unintended external impacts on social and environmental conditions.<sup>13</sup>

While continuing reforms to reduce transaction costs and unbundle land and water rights may be able to address some of these limits, it is timely to consider complementary policy and/or governance approaches and how these can be accommodated within a “cap and trade” system to produce good water outcomes.<sup>14</sup> For instance, given the uncertainties associated with groundwater trading (eg, impacts on quality, levels and groundwater dependant ecosystems),<sup>15</sup> a national conversation will be needed to consider the feasibility of new proposals and to identify international innovations such as Audited Self-Management.<sup>16</sup>

## 4. Water buy backs

Local concerns and political interference in the process of setting and implementing sustainable diversion limits under the Basin Plan have created a range of uncertainties, including the imposition of legislative caps on water buybacks. This necessitates a reimagining of environmental water transactions within the Murray

Darling Basin, which may include reconsidering the cap on buybacks, strengthening rules around environmental flows to ensure water for the environment (see below) and opening up collaboration between government and non-governmental actors in water transactions (eg, water trusts and non-profit investment in environmental water transactions). It will be critically important to design regulatory environments that allow for both collaboration between government and non-governmental actors, in order to bolster water recovery efforts, as well as institutional checks and balances to ensure sustainable water management.<sup>17</sup>

## 5. New systems for dealing with cumulative impacts

Future reform of the NWI needs to deal adequately with the cumulative impacts of water extraction on groundwater and groundwater-dependent ecosystems, particularly from mining including of unconventional gas (such as coal seam gas (CSG) and shale gas). To date, state and national efforts have been evolving and are subject to ongoing reviews (see eg, “water trigger”<sup>18</sup> and state attempts to integrate CSG and mining activities into water accounting and planning frameworks). However, laws and policies in most jurisdictions do not adequately address this issue.<sup>19</sup>

Bioregional assessment is being undertaken across a number of areas with a view to better understanding how the cumulative impacts associated with CSG and coal mining can be properly managed. However, it is crucial that the knowledge acquired through this process translates into innovative and rigorous laws and policies (which incorporate strategic planning, see below). This should include an obligation to prohibit development where there is a risk of irreversible damage to water resources. It is also crucial that this sort of assessment be undertaken in other mining-intensive areas, such as in parts of WA and SA.

## 6. Protect environmental water

Law and policy should be amended to ensure environmental water is protected as it moves through the system, ensuring naturally occurring flows, or water released from a dam for the purposes of achieving specific environmental outcomes, can reach the desired destination (such as a wetland or floodplain). Rules protecting environmental water for groundwater-dependent ecosystems need further development and increased focus on implementation, taking advantage of significant scientific advances in this area.

## 7. Implement strategic planning

While significant progress has been made across Australia in water planning, the evolution has been slow and complicated, in part because the uncertainties we confront are high and the water management challenges complex.<sup>20</sup> Acknowledging and addressing these challenges demands significantly improved strategic planning in future water reforms. Key issues will include:

- greater comprehension of surface/ground water connectivity;
- building in capacity for adaptive management at the outset;<sup>21</sup>
- accommodating the impact of climate change as a driver of future policy reform and water infrastructure development. For example, the limits on water consumption set out in the Basin Plan do not take into account likely future climate scenarios.<sup>22</sup> This is a risky policy decision and one which could have disastrous consequences for farmers and the environment alike as rainfall becomes scarcer across parts of the Basin over the next few decades;<sup>23</sup> and
- developing the definition of property rights in relation to water entitlements, in particular, whether there should be greater consistency across state/territory legislation.

## 8. Improve models and tools for participation in water governance

National water reforms have emphasised a “top down” policy approach. The focus of public participation in water governance has been either via water markets or through non-binding techniques of consultation undertaken by decision-makers. The extent of influence and genuine engagement by the broad range of interests and stakeholders in the governance of water resources has been at best uneven. Community, farming, environmental and Indigenous actors can and do remain disenfranchised in decision-making, in particular if they have limited resources, organisation or legal rights. Yet, engagement and effective participation is central to justice in democratic societies. It is critical to the inclusion of local and traditional knowledge that provide the locus for context specific solutions. It is also central to cooperative problem solving and innovation in water management, and to building trust and satisfaction with laws and plans.<sup>24</sup> The latter is particularly important to guard against further unwinding of water policy goals, ensure more successful implementation and enhance the legitimacy of the triple bottom line in water.<sup>25</sup>

The needs of public participation in decision-making and governance will vary depending on the nature or difficulty of the issue, its scale, its impacts and its

consequences. But the suite of participatory models and tools will need to further mature and evolve, beyond mere opportunities to be “consulted”, including reform of third party rights to participate in or challenge decisions on public interest grounds (such as environmental sustainability or Aboriginal heritage protection),<sup>26</sup> the development of “deliberative” democratic procedures<sup>27</sup> in appropriate circumstances, expanded use of public inquiries and hearings, establishment of “co-management” arrangements in others,<sup>28</sup> and continued evolution of “water trusts”.<sup>29</sup> These various models and tools need to be backed up by both policy support and legal mechanisms. Improving access to water data (including information about water trades and compliance with extraction limits) is also vital for building community confidence in the system. Increased focus on participatory and democratic approaches to water management provides substantial opportunities to improve accountability, efficiency and justice.<sup>30</sup>

## 9. Ensure full recognition of Indigenous interests

Despite progress in NSW and the Murray Darling Basin, engagement with Indigenous communities, and the integration of their needs and concerns, including the issue of native title water rights, has not been a priority of existing national water reforms.<sup>31</sup> This must improve. In particular, it must come to the fore in relation to the development of northern Australia where Indigenous land tenure (land rights or native title) is highly significant.<sup>32</sup>

## 10. Capitalise on successes and avoid past mistakes if northern development is pursued

The challenge of developing northern Australia’s water resources is to build on the strengths of water reforms in the Murray Darling Basin, while minimising the weaknesses. In addition, however, there are unique issues such as Indigenous interests, sensitive ecological resources such as free flowing rivers and vastly different tropical weather systems. Northern development will require all of the above priorities to be addressed in order to avoid repeating past mistakes. As the former commission chair of the NWC has stated:

We can avoid costly mistakes in the future by learning the lessons of the past. Future generations should never have to endure the social, economic and environmental costs of another Murray-Darling Basin.<sup>33</sup>

We believe these 10 priorities are central to improving Australia’s approach to managing water. We offer them with the aim of starting a much-needed conversation on the future of water governance in Australia.

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  - For example, the consideration of more detailed and rigorous environmental and public interest standards (eg, ecosystem integrity) when assessing a licence transfer (see, eg, R Nelson, “Groundwater, rivers and ecosystems: comparative insights into law and policy for making the links” (2013) 28(4) *AE* 559–560); the limitation of a transfer to the estimated amount of the water right actually consumed to avoid increased stream flow depletion; and a review of potential impacts on other water users and identification of mitigation measures — for example, to assure continued water delivery on shared infrastructure.
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  21. See, eg, B Cosens “Application of the Adaptive Water Governance Project to Management of the Lake Eyre Basin and its connections to the Great Artesian Basin” (2015) 30(6–7) *AE* 146–152.
  22. Note however that the Basin Plan pursues an adaptive approach and provides “a buffer” for ecological resilience and recovery — see [www.mdba.gov.au/basin-plan-roll-out/climate-change](http://www.mdba.gov.au/basin-plan-roll-out/climate-change); I Neave, A McLeod, G Raisin, J Swirepik, “Managing water in the Murray-Darling Basin under a variable and changing climate” 2015 42(2) *AWA Water Journal* 102–107.
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