

Turbulence in the water industry

From the Director



Director, Prof Peter Cullen.

The water industry is going through a period of great turbulence and uncertainty. Some of the dramatic re-organisation imposed is already showing signs of unravelling. Corporate memory has gone and stories abound about new managers desperately trying to find displaced employees who might remember how to manage their systems in drought, flood or even when major pipes break. The international water industry is recognising the need for capacity building at a time when Australia is going through a period of capacity shrinking.

A number of recent and very public failings of professionalism in the water industry include:

Failing to consider appropriate system boundaries;

Failure to analyse within appropriate time scales;

Failure to understand what is already known;

Poor quality investigation and research;

Advocates rather than analysts;

Inadequate critical review; and

Domination by fashions.

These are serious challenges to the professionalism, and to the standing of people in the water industry. The problems are often due to people operating outside their areas of competence, and not knowing enough about an area to be able to ask critical questions and understand the appropriateness of a proposal in any particular situation. The engineering profession has been brought up on "design manuals", and seem to believe that complex biological systems can be managed the same way, by adding the usual safety margins.

Despite the difficulties currently being experienced in the water industry, there are grounds for optimism. The industry has moved from grudging acceptance of public participation in the seventies, through a period of public involvement in the eighties to a situation where public ownership of land and water problems is dominating the nineties. Landcare and catchment management have shifted the power from large government agencies who were unable to look at the whole system other than the bits in their jurisdiction, to a situation where the community is starting to provide the integrated thinking the professionals have failed to deliver. The professionals are now seen as providers of bits of the jigsaw - important to have the bits, but useless by themselves unless someone can put them together.

This new and emerging role for the professional means we need to change the way we do things. It is no longer good enough to do things within the narrow perspective of an agency or even a State when our actions have wider ramifications, and other players in the water business have the capacity to point out our shortcomings.

These issues provide challenges for all of us.

- Peter Cullen