

Water Reform – A Nationally Significant Conversation

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Presented by: The Peter Cullen Trust Fellows Network

The purpose of the Peter Cullen Water and Environment Trust (PCT) is to foster courageous leadership to tackle big challenges in water and environment. We work towards a world where water and the environment are managed sustainably and equitably. In that context, and in collaboration, we see that water policy has a critical role in climate change policy - in mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions, adaptation to declining freshwater resources and rising temperatures, and regeneration of a healthy and sustainable natural environment.

The Trust was founded on the philosophy that, to improve Australia's water and environmental management, we need to enhance the link between good science and effective policy making. This requires effective leadership skills, particularly around communicating in ways that bring science to life and make it relevant for politicians and policy makers to make sound, informed decisions. It also requires respectful, informed and meaningful collaboration which is the key to responsible and sustainable water management, now and in the future.

The PCT Fellows are graduates of the Trust's premier Leadership Programs. They form a network of 250 vibrant and impactful leaders in the water and environment sectors, and beyond. It is this group that embarked on a process to engage in a Nationally Significant Conversation focussed on Australian water reform.

1. Priorities

This paper presents four priorities and summarises thematic conversations and accompanying suggestions for improvement or reform. In doing so it seeks to create needed and positive reform in the Australian water sector.

1. Effectively engage stakeholders

The 'how' of a reform process, including stakeholder engagement, is critical to its success. This is true of all aspects of water reform including appropriate and respectful engagement with First Nations people.

The Australian Water Partnership paper 'Community Voices – A Summary' provides an Australian perspective on the complexity and challenges of water reform and demonstrates the importance of best-practice community engagement. It represents an important contribution to the Australian water reform journey in addition to the technical and policy reform experiences. The full report is based on the experiences and learnings of Leith Bouilly, Karlene Maywald and Michelle Campbell (Friends and Fellows of PCT). The report presents key principles (leadership, trust, clarity of purpose, joint discovery, flexibility and managing change) and contends that a cornerstone for success in stakeholder engagement is acknowledging that science will inform but it is people who collectively solve problems.

To achieve reform success, we need to make space for people in highly contested policy areas. We can learn from the past failures, and successes, of Australian water reform through investing in leadership and engagement and allowing for time and flexibility in policy development.

2. Build capacity

Authentic leadership is critical for successful water reform and leadership development is a shared priority. It is important to build and enhance leadership skills in the water sector through focussed training, tools and programs such as those run by the Peter Cullen Trust.

Capacity in water science, planning and allocation have been identified as gaps that require ongoing development; providing pathways into careers and recognition of talent in these areas will enhance capacity.

It is also important to build and enhance water literacy and water leadership in sectors related to water including climate, energy, waste, urban planning, insurance and finance – a gap analysis could identify areas that require particular focus.

If communities are to effectively engage in water reform, they also require opportunity to increase their knowledge of water and water policy systems. More and better coverage of water policy and management in news cycles, public and social fora, and accessible information should continue to be a focus.

3. Learn from each other

While formal capacity development through training and provision of tools is important, water reforms can also permeate more effectively if there is recognition of, and support for, knowledge platforms and informal systems of knowledge exchange (when reflecting on the principle that people are the agents of reform, not just good science and policy).

Innovation and learning occur when emerging practices and ideas are shared, nurtured and elevated. Embracing technology and other opportunities for genuine exchange between places, jurisdictions and institutions will enhance Australia's water reform journey.

This PCT water reform challenge provided one such opportunity.

4. Improve alignment and adopt common terms

A critical policy reform for sustainable, integrated water management is to align water policy, planning and management with related agendas to achieve multiple, integrated outcomes. For example:

- align water planning to include biodiversity, environmental (e.g. State of the Environment) water quality, and social and cultural agendas, as well as productive use of available water outcomes; and
- adopt a multi-objective approach to align water planning as part of a broader catchment or resource management framework (consider reworking the original National Landcare Program (NHT) program logic and outcomes framework).

Importantly, there needs to be common terms and language that support different water contexts across Australia as historic terminology of jurisdictions and regions may act as a barrier to shared understanding and progressive policy reform.

2. Thematic Conversation Summaries

To enable a deeper dive into a topic of interest, the conversation participants split into six thematic groups to exchange ideas and share learning across jurisdictions and across different perspectives. Much of the value of the conversation is in the interaction, the ideas raised, questions formed, judgements suspended, and references and sources shared. This process was never intended to produce consensus; however, Fellows were able to agree on the following summaries.

1. *Informed by Trusted Science*

Water reform needs to provide a platform for proactive sharing of key science and policy solutions and for enhancing and promoting community engagement and learning. This will increase trust and understanding of water challenges and solutions, and enhance and accelerate the implementation of solutions. In discussing science in particular, the conversation concluded that language does matter. That adopting common language around water science and its relation to policy is a critical foundation for innovation.

Reform priorities should include:

- Improving the availability and use of the science base for managing water in Australia, by adopting a national data repository;
- Ensuring there is a pipeline of researchers and scientists available to address our current and future challenges, and learn from other jurisdictions that have successfully tackled this issue e.g. Fraunhofer in Germany, KWR in the Netherlands, and USA Dept of Energy;
- Promoting science communication and water literacy across the nation at all levels of government; and
- Enhancing community understanding of water science and information through collaborative knowledge sharing.

2. *Strategic approach to better groundwater management*

Effective water planning must prepare us for future climate risks and make the most of all available sources of water – groundwater is integral to Australia having an acceptable quantity and quality of water for people, industry, agriculture, cultural needs and the environment now and into the future.

Reform priorities should include:

- Developing principles for integrated groundwater and surface water storage management;
- Elevating the need for, and increasing capacity for, adaptive groundwater management;
- Harmonising surface and groundwater rules and policies across different states; and
- Adopting adaptive Managed Aquifer Recharge, exploring the intentional recharge of water to aquifers within a water entitlement framework, as a climate buffer.

3. *Facilitating First Nations peoples' rights and interests in water*

First Nations people have a unique connection to waters and hold a deep, sophisticated knowledge of how to manage them. National water reform needs to clarify objectives, with tangible actions, to

properly recognise First Nations people's water rights and interests. This is not just the right thing to do for reconciliation, it's also the smart thing to do for sustainable water management.

Reform should drive:

- First Nations people's rights to water and economic justice;
- Coordinating work with Traditional Owners and First Nations people, in partnership, where First Nations people's voices are respected and have authority,
- Making water available for Traditional Owners self-determined use, including through mechanisms to enable water for cultural purposes and water for economic purposes and secure household water supplies for communities; and
- Embracing First Nations people's knowledge and formulating policy using clear and committal language.

4. Ensuring access to safe and secure drinking water

All Australians have a right to safe and secure water for lives and livelihoods.

Reform priorities should include:

- Ensuring water equity – where the water inequity suffered by rural and remote communities is addressed with common service levels standards delivered across jurisdictions and community size;
- Adaptive management that allows for a long-term view and adoption of different approaches in different geographical locations and stress test supply security under differing climate change scenarios;
- Local inclusion/decision making and management - communities are engaged, improving transparency, decision making and sustainable and equitable outcomes to enable thriving (not just surviving) communities; and
- Prioritising investment to infrastructure development using a national approach/criterion– including new technologies and capacities.

5. Regional Water for Community Wellbeing and Productive Use

This recommendation is for a more holistic approach to water and regional communities.

A broader view of water in relation to changing climate (beyond technical areas of water modelling, allocation, and sharing) should include:

- Reviewing legislative and policy frameworks in the related areas of water, environment and agriculture/industry, noting interrelated climate impacts, and developing a holistic framework that brings these areas together for high-level integration;
- Planning for, preparing and responding to climate futures effectively;
- Considering the hierarchy of water provision to ensure societal need for food security is met; and
- Deliberative approaches needed, engaging local leaders, to counter low levels of trust and confidence and address management pressures in effective and equitable ways.

6. *Water Accounting, Allocation and Planning*

Good water allocation planning and effective implementation and review of plans is critical to successful water management. Knowing and communicating allocation limits or sustainable yields to adaptively manage how much water is available is also important. Accurate and up to date water accounts can assist here.

Reform should include:

- Developing a water allocation planning framework that is truly national (i.e. one that goes beyond the Murray Darling Basin by considering all types of water resources/systems) and that includes a risk-based filter to guide planning approaches that ‘best fit’ different contexts;
- Promoting a refined, agreed version of NWI Schedule E and the COAG National Water Policy Guidelines for Water Planning and Management as benchmark tools for jurisdictions;
- Valuing water more effectively to consistently recognise the true cost of water and effective water management;
- Developing a framework to guide water accounting standards and methods considering different contexts and scales, e.g., for estimating stock & domestic water use, and interception water uses; and
- Building capacity across all jurisdictions for water planning and allocation through establishing a national community of practice, for example.

3. **A Case for an Independent National Water Entity**

The PCT Fellows consider there is great value in establishing a national, independent water entity, accountable to all governments, on water reform progress. To be effective a new entity must be a truly independent body, unhampered by single agency, single jurisdiction or single water system (e.g. MDB) bias. It is noted that the previous NWC reported to the Council of Australian Governments (CoAG).

Previously the NWC successfully invested in new knowledge (through the Raising National Water Standards program), fearlessly reported to CoAG on reform progress, and engaged openly and broadly with the water sectors and interdependent policy areas of governments, academia and the private sector.

A national entity is essential to coordinate, enable, and report on the implementation of the next stage reforms and to ensure achievement of desired outcomes. It should provide focus on national direction and principles and be well positioned to deliver, coordinate, or establish expectations across the four priorities we identified in this process, namely: effectively engage stakeholders; build capacity; improve alignment and adopt common terms; and establish an enabling environment where we can learn from each other.

Furthermore, a national entity should be a trusted source of independent advice and independent accountability for reforms. It may also review and confirm roles, including of DCCEE as leading national water policy with the state jurisdictions.

Whatever form it takes, a key role should be to work with jurisdictions to raise the bar to achieve shared water management outcomes rather than tick the box.

4. Concluding comments

Water reform deserves a greater sense of urgency and purpose to address the challenges that climate change poses, in addition to the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals. All jurisdictions, and stakeholders, have an obligation and an opportunity to work together to progress water-climate reform and address long-term structural and resource challenges with courage and urgency.

Peter Cullen Trust Fellows share a common platform of respecting others' views and a culture of trust. Our network practices Chatham House Rule, enabling us as engaged and committed leaders working right across Australia, to work together for a healthier planet.

Building on the enormous contribution of the late Professor Peter Cullen AO, we continue to work to enhance the link between good science and effective policy making. This requires effective leadership, courage to speak truth to power, and an ability to engage with our communities and one another.

Regardless of any other decisions or processes, water reform should embrace a national approach across the four priorities identified in this Nationally Significant Conversation. It should:

- Effectively engage stakeholders;
- Build capacity;
- Improve alignment and adopt common terms; and
- Establish an enabling environment where we can learn from each other.

This is the pathway to respectful, informed and meaningful collaboration, which is key to responsible water management, now and in the future.

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