

Senate Environment and Communications Committee: Proposed National Water Commission Abolition Legislation

Submission from the Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities

The CRC for Water Sensitive Cities

The Co-operative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities brings together the inter-disciplinary research expertise and thought-leadership to undertake research to help transform water management in Australia and overseas. In collaboration with over 80 research, industry and government partners, the CRC will deliver the socio-technical urban water management solutions, education and training programs, and industry engagement required to make towns and cities water sensitive. With a research budget in excess of \$100million, our research over the next nine years will guide capital investments of more than \$100 Billion by the Australian water sector and more than \$550 Billion of private sector investment in urban development over the next 15 year

Response to proposed reforms

Australia is at the forefront of debates around the management and use of water resources. Governments and water businesses are dealing with increasingly complex issues related to climate change, use and management of scarce water resources, growth versus conservation, and economic growth versus sustainability.

The use and management of water resources is critical to long term community wellbeing and economic prosperity. The recent millennium drought in Australia was extremely severe and greatly affected both rural and urban communities, with reduced agricultural productivity, challenged community cohesion through the loss of open space amenity, stressing ecosystems and increasing risk of bush fires.

Historically, much of the intellectual capital with respect to water operation and policy has resided in employees of government and semi-government organisations . The economic reforms of the last 30 years have resulted in improved economic efficiency and performance of the Australian urban water sector, but the response from governments to the millennium drought is widely perceived as delayed and poorly planned and lacking in innovative thinking.

Visionary initiatives to create water supply and sewerage systems in response to the rapid urban growth in the 19th century and then post War period, established the basic form of our urban water services. These services have been fundamental to protecting public health, supporting economic growth and the

green open spaces, waterways, coasts and bays that are essential to the liveability of Australia's major cities and their international competitiveness.

The start of the new millennia saw the largest wave of capital investment in the water sector since the post war period. Much of this was in creating new desalination and recycled water infrastructure. This reflects that traditional water supplies for Australian cities are mostly fully allocated and expected to be further stressed by climate change. Nevertheless, many of these projects have been criticized as knee jerk reactions to the millennium drought. Debate about the future form of water services to Australian cities is divided and politicized. A contest of ideas rages across numerous interest groups and institutions and while there are many sources of new thinking in the water sector, there has been little real change in water services so far.

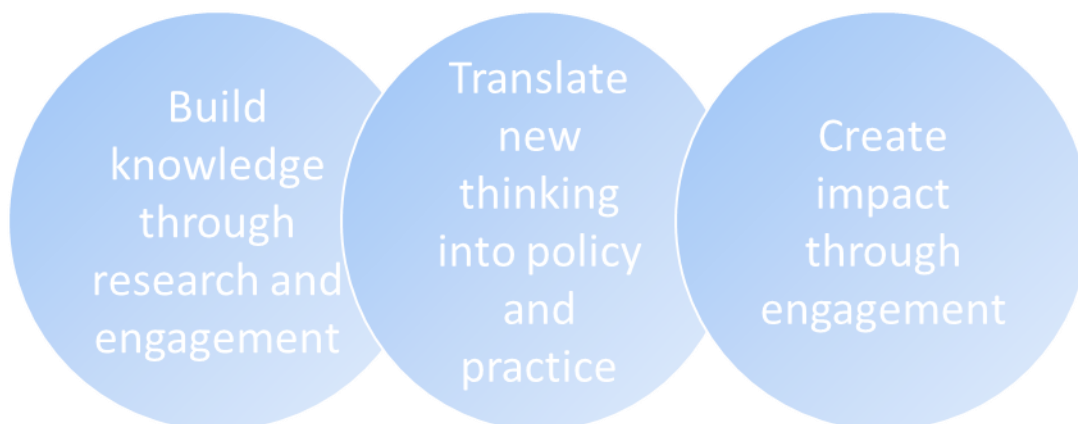
At this critical time in our history there is need to focus on the evaluation of new ideas, translating new ideas into public policy and finding pathways for policy implementation.

An alternative

Should the Federal Government proceed with the abolition of the NWC, we believe there would be value in the Government supporting the establishment of an independent policy institute. This institute would be focussed on three main activities aimed at the translation of new thinking into the way we manage our water resources to enhance our economic prosperity, the wellbeing of communities and the sustainability of our cities. These are:

- Building knowledge of the **biggest challenges to adoption of new thinking** in water management through targeted research and engagement with stakeholders
- Focussing action on the **translation of new thinking into urban and rural water management policy and practice**
- Creating positive **impact through active engagement** with stakeholders and the public to build support for change

The emphasis should be on widespread engagement rather than back room deliberation, being relevant and outcome focused, being independent but working strongly with decision makers to institutionalize meaningful change.



Such an institute could be established with a small core staff working under an advisory board of eminent people (thought leaders). One option is for this institute to be hosted by Monash University and the CRC for Water Sensitive Cities. With the CRC as a founding partner, the Institute would be able to leverage off a critical mass of expertise and resources within universities and industry in Australia, Singapore and China to tackle the urban water policy challenges of our time. There will be opportunities for other industry and university partners will join the Institute as it develops.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the CRC for Water Sensitive Cities believes there is an important place for a national focus for thought leadership in water policy. The National Water Commission has taken that role previously. They were also a national focus for stakeholders with an interest or issues in water. In splitting up its functions amongst three different groups, the legislative functions are maintained but the important policy functions and its ability to then communicate with authority to government appear to be lost at a critical time for Australia and the management of water in our cities. The CRC has undertaken widespread discussion within the water industry about the value of a policy institute to take on a national thought leadership role. We urge the Government to consider this alternative should it proceed with the abolition of the NWC.

Contact details

CRCWSC welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee on this important matter. If there are any details you wish to follow up on, please contact:
Chris Chesterfield Director Stakeholder Engagement Executive Director