

## **Arid Lands Environment Centre Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee**

### **National Water Commission Abolition Bill 2014**

The Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) is the peak regional environmental organisation servicing Central Australia. ALEC's vision for 'healthy futures for arid lands and people' is supported through its work on community education, strategic policy advocacy and developing local initiatives to support local sustainability and biodiversity conservation.

ALEC has been represented on the Alice Springs Water Advisory Committee (ASWAC) since its inception in 2008. ALEC has also commented on the review of the Draft Great Artesian Basin Water Allocation Plan (2013) and the Draft Alice Springs Water Allocation Plan Draft (2013) and continues to advocate for long-term planning and sustainable policy reform in relation to groundwater.

ALEC does not support the proposed abolition of the National Water Commission (NWC). The National Water Commission has provided a framework for national water planning and provided an impetus for sustainable resource management in Australia. The independence of the NWC has been key to its success in supporting and driving water planning and policy reform across the nation.

The National Water Initiative has provided critical support for national decision-making on issues related to water management. The long-term vision and independence of the Commission has provided Australia with a world class national water policy framework that has supported a holistic approach to water management and water reform.

The outcomes of the Commission has been the envy of the world, in that we managed to have an independent, national water commission driving national water reform. The National Water Commission provides a bipartisan and cross-jurisdictional approach to water reform. It provides a safety net for water policy and ensures that research and resource-sharing is undertaken in the national interest.

ALEC is strongly concerned that the scrapping of the NWC will result in piecemeal and ad hoc water policy and adversely affect Australia's surface and groundwater supplies. The Alice Springs Water Allocation Plan - which included a groundwater extraction cap has remained in draft form since March 2013 and no clarity on water allocation in the region has been provided by the Department of Land Resource Management. In the Top End, the Northern Territory Minister for Land Resource Management, Mr Westra Van Holthe is alleged to have acted unlawfully in allocating water licences outside of the established planning processes. The Environment Centre NT is courageously challenging the lack of process and over-allocation of the Tindall aquifer in the Daly Region (See: <http://www.ecnt.org/media/water-extraction-row-goes-court>). Without national oversight and independence from partisan politics - ALEC fears for the future of our groundwater supplies and the ability of community interest groups to participate in water planning processes.

ALEC has no confidence that the government will maintain the water reform agenda as per the National Water Initiative. It needs to be driven by an independent body that is not subject to

political interests and agendas. Water is too important to leave unregulated and subjected to the constant erosion of importance as fossil fuels and mineral exploration take hold across the arid lands of Australia.

We need transparency and accountability in the allocation and management of Australia's most important resource. Groundwater supplies are critical to ensure that a future for regional Australia. Australia needs to maintain an independent National Water Commission to ensure that a fair and equitable approach to water policy is maintained. The uncertainty around water policy is already driving unsustainable allocation and potentially contaminating fossil fuel exploration across the NT. The Australian Senate has the opportunity to ensure that our water planning and policy framework continues to deliver for Australians for generations to come and not submit to the whims and wishes of big business interests supported by government ministers.

Please do not scrap the National Water Commission, without it - the National Water Initiative will simply become a historical reference point in a drier and hotter future. There is no basis for destroying the NWC, except to pave the way for unsustainable water extraction and potential contamination by fossil fuel and mineral resource companies. Australia's National Water Initiative has been a shining light of sustainable water management on a national level across the globe. We are the driest continent and need to manage our water sustainably and for the long term. It would be irresponsible to scrap the National Water Commission without a replacement body to continue the task of water reform across the Commonwealth. Good water policy is in the common interest of all Australians. Don't scrap the National Water Commission - like water, we need it.

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