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13 October 2014

Christine McDonald  
Secretary, Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms McDonald,

## **ENVIRONS KIMBERLEY'S RESPONSE TO INQUIRY INTO THE NATIONAL WATER COMMISSION (ABOLITION) BILL 2014**

Environs Kimberley is the Kimberley's peak conservation NGO, set up in 1996. We have two broad functions: we represent the interests of Kimberley people and the public in the environment, and we carry out on-ground collaborative environmental management work with community members, Aboriginal ranger groups, local organisations and government agencies.

We strongly support the retention of the National Water Commission (NWC).

### **Independent Expert National Body**

The importance of the Commission's role in providing independent expert advice on matters of national water reform and assessing and monitoring the National Water Initiative (NWI) cannot be overstated. This was recognised by COAG in its 2011 audit, which stated that the NWC should continue for the life of the NWI.

The NWC has charted a balanced and inclusive course through many technically complex and politically divisive matters concerning water. We have valued its promotion of cooperative approaches to water resource management, and its advocacy for sound science and transparent information to support decision-making by governments and communities.

The body's separation from government has been essential to the success of the NWC in its impartial engagement with government, industry and community.

The Federal Government's proposal to transfer NWC responsibilities to the Productivity Commission, the Department of the Environment and consultants, among others, will undermine the progress that has been made to date and jeopardise the implementation of the NWI. The Productivity Commission's core business is to conduct assessments of the economic and social impacts of economic reforms, which is likely to conflict at times with NWC functions.

### Participatory planning informed by the best available science and understanding of the resource

Communities across the country have benefitted from the Commission's efforts to provide information, advice and resources on the national water reform agenda. We are not only more aware of the problems being faced in managing water nationally and in our regions, but we have been engaged in conversations about what options are available to us in facing them. In the Kimberley, for example, we have received NWC support for local participation in water planning and sustainable management through initiatives such as the Kimberley Water Forum in 2008.

### Indigenous Rights and Interests

From the outset, the NWC has strongly supported and promoted Indigenous rights and interests in water and Indigenous participation in water planning and management.

Across Northern Australia, Indigenous people manage over 40% of the land and waters and have interests in well over 80%. The NWC has supported the establishment of bodies such as the [Indigenous Water Policy Group](#) and the [Indigenous Community Water Facilitators Network](#), which have been indispensable in engaging local people and their representative organisations in water reform processes.

### Water for the Environment and Sustainable Water Management

The NWC has been a voice of reason on complex matters such as the settling of competing demands for ground and surface water. Its position that decision-making must be informed by the best available science, broader natural resource management planning, socio-economic analysis and community input has strongly influenced discussions about water in our region. Its statements about environmental water requirements needing to be considered alongside economic, social and cultural ones reflects a measured and pragmatic approach to planning and management that considers all water uses. The 2011 COAG review asserted that the NWC should retain its knowledge leadership function<sup>1</sup>.

The Commission's activities have made us more aware of the challenges we face and have enabled people in the Kimberley and across northern Australia to contribute to wider conversations about changes and solutions.

Scientifically informed and inclusive water planning and management are critical for Northern Australia and for Australia as a whole if we are to avoid the costly mistakes of southern Australia and to face challenges effectually.

Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on (08) 9192 1922.

Yours sincerely

Martin Pritchard | Director

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalky, D. (2011) COAG Review of the National Water Commission <http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/water/australian-government-water-leadership/council-australian-governments-water-reform-1>