

# Australian Greens Dissenting Report

## Introduction

1.1 The aim of the Inquiry was to consider the impact of the National Water Commission (Abolition) Bill 2014 which would dissolve the National Water Commission and significantly impact independent monitoring and assessment of water reform. The Greens thank the committee and public for their valuable input into the inquiry.

1.2 The National Water Commission was established in 2004 by the then Howard government and has had bipartisan support for its continuation until recently. In the lead up to the 2014 budget the Coalition government indicated that it would seek to shut down the Commission. This was confirmed in that budget.

1.3 The National Water Commission is the only federal, independent authority on water. While there are other government organisations which monitor aspects of water policy, none of these have the independence currently afforded the National Water Commission.

1.4 Given the current threats to our water supplies, from climate change and the mining industry in particular, as well as often competing priorities between water use for production and water for the environment, the Greens are concerned by the proposal to remove the Commission.

1.5 The Greens note that the vast majority of submissions to the Inquiry argued that the Commission should be kept; a number of submissions suggested amendments only in the event that the National Water Commission was to be abolished.

1.6 The life of the National Water Commission was recently extended, in 2012, after a COAG assessment which noted:

There is an ongoing need for a centre for knowledge and discussion on water reform matters outside the various policy agendas to enable pertinent research and information to be drawn together and focused onto pressing policy issues.<sup>1</sup>

1.7 The need for ongoing reform of water policy has been stated in a number of submissions to the Inquiry, and can also be seen in public statements from the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists<sup>2</sup> and the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering.<sup>3</sup> Given the ongoing experience of drought in parts of Australia and the risk of further drought, the need for forward thinking on water policy is glaringly apparent.

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1 <http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/pages/8e67c6b4-c2f5-4747-b6cc-7a0aab52474b/files/coag-review-national-water-commission.pdf>

2 <http://wentworthgroup.org/2014/10/statement-on-the-future-of-australias-water-reform/2014/>

3 <http://www.atse.org.au/content/publications/Media-release-content/2014/new-national-water-reform-strategy-needed.aspx>

1.8 The National Water Commission functions not only to audit the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and report on the progress of the National Water Initiative, but provides an ongoing leadership role in terms of water policy. It operates as a central space for the dialogue on water policy, including information on water from across the states. To this end, they have been crucial in highlighting problems around the coal seam gas industry, Indigenous water issues and the interaction of water policy with other agendas. The Greens are concerned that these functions will no longer continue if the Bill passes and the Commission is abolished.

1.9 The transferral of the monitoring of the National Water Initiative and the auditing of the Murray-Darling Basin over to the Productivity Commission presents a number of concerns. The Productivity Commission has a legislated emphasis on industry, with a minor mention of ecological sustainability in the context of industry development.<sup>4</sup> The vast difference in expertise of the National Water Commission and the Productivity Commission is acknowledged in the majority committee report (section 2.45).

1.10 Further, the Productivity Commission does not have the level and range of expertise in water policy. This was acknowledged at the Inquiry hearing and the Productivity Commission said they would need to ‘buy them in’.

1.11 The Productivity Commission also has a range of other responsibilities and it is unlikely that the level of ongoing consultation offered by the National Water Commission is able to be replicated in this new model.

1.12 The savings from abolishing the Commission—\$20.9 million over four years—are extremely small, especially given the unique value that the Commission offers.

1.13 The Greens were concerned to hear that a similar amount of money is planned to be spent on setting up an Australian Water Centre which, as Professor Richard Kingsford told the Inquiry, appears aimed at ‘attracting business from the rest of the world about how we do our water management’.<sup>5</sup> The Greens argue that this money would be better spent on maintaining the National Water Commission and continuing the unfinished business of water reform before we attempted to spruik our successes.

### **The Greens vision for Australian water policy**

1.14 The Greens believe that the priority for water policy in Australia needs to be sustainability, aimed at ensuring resilience through periods of drought and supporting our ecosystems.

1.15 We note that there are difficulties in managing water between states and territories, and that some federal guidance is crucial in assisting this.

1.16 Independent analysis of these issues, which is not linked to industry, nor government agendas, but is instead based on scientific evidence, and carried out in

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4 *Productivity Commission Act 1998*, subpara. 8(1)(i).

5 Prof Richard Kingsford, *Committee Hansard*, 4 November 2014, p. 3.

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consultation with local communities, especially Aboriginal groups, is crucial for effective water policy.

### **Response to Committee Comments**

1.17 The specific national, independent oversight offered by the National Water Commission is not duplicated by any federal or state body.

1.18 Numerous stakeholder concerns about the Productivity Commission have not been addressed by the majority Committee report—primarily, the lack of expertise, levels of consultation and continuity of work.

1.19 There has been no argument or evidence put for the case that a standalone agency is no longer required; rather, submissions and public comments from relevant bodies (mentioned above) have highlighted the opposite.

### **Dissenting report recommendations**

- 1. The Greens recommend that the National Water Commission be maintained and its budget reinstated.**
- 2. A revived Commission should incorporate an Aboriginal Commissioner.**
- 3. A revived Commission should have, as part of its mandate, responsibility for making recommendations on water policy in the context of climate change.**
- 4. A revived Commission should be given responsibility for reviewing the potential impacts of mining on water supplies and suggested national policy responses to this.**
- 5. A revived Commission should also be given a mandate to investigate and report on any areas of water policy potentially assessed as in need of development.**

**Senator Lee Rhiannon**  
**Senator for New South Wales**

