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Lyndal Betteridge
Groundwater Planning Group
Water Division
Department of Planning, Industry & Environment
Sydney

DRAFT NSW GREAT ARTESIAN BASIN (GAB) SHALLOW WATER RESOURCE PLAN

Dear Lyndal,

The NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the above draft plan. The Council represents irrigation farmers and the irrigation industry with over 25 member organisations many of whom rely on groundwater resources. The Council supports the development of a comprehensive and effective groundwater management framework for this water resource as it does for the Murray Darling Basin.

Our Council always stresses the importance of prudent and sustainable management of water resources for agriculture and, of course, for other industries. We therefore laud the Department in drafting the plan for the NSW Great Artesian Basin (GAB) Shallow Water Resource.

After consultations with several relevant members of our Council, several issues were identified for further consideration for the revision of the plan. These are briefly explained below.

Relevance to the Basin in NSW

It seems the NSW GAB is being treated as a part of the MDB with the development of the NSW-GAB Shallow WRP. Although the map in Figure 1-1 (Schedule E) shows an overlaying network of Water Resource Plan Areas (WRPA) present in this section of the basin, we expect the Department to have tested its assumption (page 20 of the plan) that indeed there are no significant hydrological connections with either surface waters or the adjacent groundwater sources. This is because Schedule I (Section 1.2) states that "The NSW GAB Shallow WRP will cover all groundwater that is contained within the unconsolidated alluvial deposits regardless of depth and all other geological formations to a maximum depth of 60 metres below the surface of the ground."

We seek clarification on why the GAB is being brought into MDB Plan process at this time given it has always been treated as a discrete aquifer and a separate water source.

Objectives, strategies, performance indicators and definitions

The current description of the environment objectives in the plan is not clear enough to enable later evaluation. Furthermore, the definition of Planned Environmental Water (PEW) is too loose and poorly defined. It also possibly impacts property rights in restricting options for the license holder rights (as contained in the Water Act) in extending the distance for bore installation from new water supply work or GDEs.

The definition of PEW as “all water remaining in excess of the Long Term Average Annual Extraction Limit (LTAAEL) for each groundwater source on a long-term average annual basis” (page 36) does not make clear that it, and presumably Held Environmental Water (HEW), also includes Cultural Water (page 38).

Definitions should be succinct and performance indicators should be quantifiable

It is our position that all water take, including environmental and cultural, should be quantified and accounted for

Alignment with WSP and Basin Plan

The three discrete Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) units are specified in the draft plan to be consistent with both WSP and Basin Plan (Section 5.2.1) and are also equivalent to the long-term average annual extraction limits (LTAAELs) for the groundwater sources. These underpin the criteria for quantifying actual take (AT) either directly using meters or indirectly where no metering installed (Schedule I, Section 1.1). The requirement for all new and replacement meters to be pattern-approved and meet the requirements of the Australian Standard 4747 by December 2020 will be a challenge for our members as there are outstanding issues such as the absence of ministerial endorsed loggers, lack of water for calibration, limited number of duly qualified installers, amongst others. NSWIC believes the Department needs to embark on engagement activities to inform license holders on attaining compliance within the timeframe.

At a minimum, by 1 December 2019, ensure that all Water Access Licence (WAL) holders have had an initial meeting with a Duly Qualified Person, or have had their paperwork assessed, to ensure that progress is made towards meeting the new requirements

Compliance methodology

It is explained in Section 5.2 that for the NSW GAB Shallow SDL resource units, the SDLs are taken to be equivalent to the LTAAELs, this would reduce confusion. Furthermore, we support in principle the adoption of a five-year rolling average for determining the LTAAELs with 5%

trigger. In our view, it allows for the likely impacts of climate variability. It is however not clear if the process for determining permitted take is also variable based on climate or just based on fixed shares.

Clarify how compliance of permitted take with the Basin Plan will be assessed

NSWIC suggests further engagement with water users to explore viable options to effectively address inadvertent non-compliance

Other comments

Given the complexity of aggregating WSP into one WRP and other Water Management Strategies, the Department should consider developing an easy tool to guide water users in understanding their responsibilities (and/or opportunities) regarding groundwater. Many farms have multiple groundwater sources underneath them and it is not always easy to discern which WSP and, therefore, which rules are applicable. Such a tool will be especially valuable to new users or those looking to trade in new licences. The tool can be as simple as a map showing possible groundwater sources and their characteristics.

NSWIC welcomes this public consultation on the Draft NSW Great Artesian Basin Shallow Water Resource Plan. It is important that consistency is maintained in developing plans for the various valleys, also making sure that local expertise is utilised in their design.

NSWIC is always pleased to work with the Department on the above issues. We look forward to your feedback on the issues presented in this letter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Luke Simpkins', written in a cursive style.

Luke Simpkins
CEO