

13/08/2014

Mr Ian Hunter MLC

Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation

Minister for Water and the River Murray

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation

Dear Minister,

RE: Review process for State Government Boards and Committees.

I write to you in my capacity as acting Chair of the Barossa Water Allocation Plan Advisory Committee (WAPAC), in response to your recent letter seeking feedback on the above process.

In contemplating how best to table the relevant points raised by our committee in response to your request, the phrase "Whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting over" came to mind.

Being predominantly Barossa based we could suggest that wine is the preferred substitute for whiskey in this case; however we suggest no such alternative to the reference to water.

You raise a number of points for consideration in your recent letter;

1. Where do you value add and / or what are the current benefits for government of the Board or Committee?
2. What are the risks if your Board was abolished or what would be lost?
3. Please outline or suggest better, improved or smarter ways of government achieving the outcomes delivered by your board or committee?

To address those particular points;

1. Current benefits

The WAPAC committee and its predecessor Water Committees have been the reference committees for the Water Resources Management in regard to formulation, ongoing management and review of Water Allocation Plans for over 30 years. Membership on the committee was limited to successful applicants who demonstrated suitable levels of skill, knowledge, experience and community engagement. The current committee consists of land and business owners, local council and peak body representatives; each is suitably qualified and capable to engage in informed discussion and debate on the issue of water resource management. In most cases the committee members have been engaged in both water and other resource management issues for a significant number of years. In short, a focused group of experienced, intelligent, engaged and holistic thinkers focussed on water management issues in the region.

The benefits to the government in being able to access a group such as this, without the need for advertised community engagement, extensive preparation, concern over containment of sensitive issues or discussions should be abundantly clear.

Predominantly this group volunteers their time, despite the option of remuneration being available.

When viewed pragmatically the cost of running the Barossa WAPAC involving as it does volunteer work by its committee members, against the substantial benefits of consolidating stakeholders views and providing a safety vent for community disaffection, would seem to be a good investment of state funds.

The Barossa WAPAC has through its actions been a major contributor to driving the need for additional science to support the water planning process and ensuring this science where possible is calibrated to local issues.

The WAPAC committee is directly linked to the water allocation planning process. If a committee or group such as this does not exist, how does the Government expect to convince stakeholders that they have a genuine commitment to informed community engagement; a local workshop every now and then?; a broad collection of interested community members trying to cover a wide range of issues (such as the current "Champions" approach under the NRM group umbrella)?

If water is indeed "for fighting over" a more focussed approach is critical.

2. Risks/Loss

As a focused group of informed and experienced stakeholders attuned to sustainable water resources management in one of the key agricultural areas of the state, we strongly believe that WAPAC adds far greater value than the relatively small cost of operation.

In areas of state policy determination and administration where there are multiple stakeholders and especially where the matters to be administered are complex and technical at a local level, administration from the central bureaucracy has not in the past led to solutions which account for the rights of the individual in many cases.

The Barossa's economic future is largely reliant on access to a sustainable high quality water supply. This in turn relies on the equitable allocation of water for environmental, economic and social purposes.

If the local reference committee is abolished then the only recourse any citizen has is a political one. In this era this course would be pursued both in the press, the polls and in the social media.

In worst case scenarios the results may be determined in the courts. As we have seen recently as a result of the Zander case, the outcome, although viewed as a win by the Government, has reinforced a view that the pursuit of 'victory' is more important than the resource that the WAP was designed to protect in the first place.

It must be noted that the Barossa WAPAC foresaw the likelihood of this type of situation arising many years ago, and suggested of a method to not only to avoid such procedural waste and individual distress but to achieve a sustainable outcome. However as is often the case, good advice was ignored and much reputational capital value has been destroyed in the process.

If the committee is abolished it will free up the local citizenry to pursue their goals more vigourously in strong political campaigns run locally. If this occurs across the wider proclaimed regions by the abolition of WAPACs in other catchments, then the government will face a significantly more difficult course of action to arrive at an equitable share among competing stakeholders.

This will be a retreat to the system of the 1980s, where hostile 'water communities' were 'at war with' the government. This led to the reform of the Water Resources Act in 1997 and the establishment of Catchment Water Management Boards. These worked well, and established the foundation of the present NRM processes which unfortunately are now often seen as an extension of the Government bureaucracy. If more of a local community based process is abolished this will be viewed by the community as another move towards 'Big Government'.

3. The future

From a stakeholder perspective it is critical that local needs are considered in ongoing water resource management activities.

It is not the view of informed stakeholders that diluting the emphasis of key issues such as water resource management into the broader scope of NRM groups is appropriate.

The linking of committees such as the WAPAC to water allocation planning process is critical.

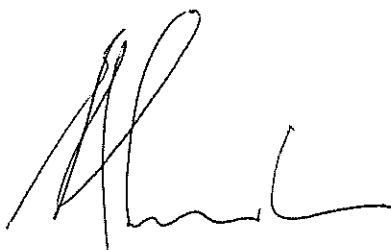
The bureaucracy has overtaken the core function of stakeholder engagement in the management of critical issues such as water. Simplify the process, maintain core focus groups on issues such as water, the surrounding environments and the community and listen to their collective wisdom.

Regardless of your decision, the view that "water is for fighting over" will remain.

It would reflect well on the Government to not only maintain but to improve its engagement with informed stakeholders. We view maintaining groups such as the WAPACs linked to the water planning process as a critical component of that objective.

On behalf of the Barossa WAPAC I thank you for the opportunity to comment and await with interest progress reports on the Premiers process.

Yours Sincerely



Matt Alexander

Acting Chair

NMLR WAPAC

