



COMMENT

On the ACTEW Report into Future Water Options for the ACT Region – Implementation Plan.

**June
2005**

INTRODUCTION

ACTCOSS acknowledges that modern day Canberra has been built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage they have suffered since European settlement. ACTCOSS celebrates the Ngunnawal's living culture and valuable contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage, and low-income citizens of the Territory. ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS's objectives are representation of people living with disadvantage, the promotion of equitable social policy, and the development of a professional, cohesive and effective community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the Community Services Program (CSP) which is a program of the ACT Government.

Water supply and social equity.

ACTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to discuss the social implications of the proposals put forward in the “Future Water Options for the ACT Region – Implementation Plan”. As the ACT Government is aware, ACTCOSS combined with the Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra (CCSERAC) in 2003 to develop a joint water options paper, based on the idea of ecological and social sustainability. A copy is attached.

Those views continue to inform our position on water provision. We therefore make the following comments on Future Water Options in reinforcement of those goals.

Firstly there is a need for clarity in the debate over water futures. While Canberrans have managed some spectacular water savings during the drought, there is no guarantee that those gains will be maintained once there is a return to near-full catchments.

ACTCOSS would like to see the detail from the Government as to how the goal of a 25% reduction in water usage by 2023 will mesh with the Future Water Options measures.

Secondly, ACTCOSS notes that in the discussion of population growth, the paper talks about “Canberra’s population growth to 500,000 by 2032 and the need for ACTEW to service growth in the surrounding region as well.¹”

This discussion is not enlarged upon, nor is there any exploration of what “the need for ACTEW to service growth in the surrounding region” may entail. ACTCOSS is aware of the ACT’s current arrangements with Queanbeyan, and the repeated attempts by Yass to secure supply from the ACT for its residents (repeated again in the Canberra Times of 24 July, 2005). This is in addition to several major residential developments currently pending within short distances from Canberra’s borders.

Our third concern is the burden of cost for the intermediate and longer term options. Water provision for domestic consumption is a right, based on human need and public health requirements. ACTCOSS believes that the demand for increased water storage is, in part, driven by inability to curb consumption of what has become a commodity.

In any consideration of how to distribute the costs of the options, including a continual retrofitting and water efficiency strategy that helps consumers control their water use, the needs of low income households must be paramount. In our submission to the 2003 Water Pricing Inquiry, ACTCOSS made the point that:

¹ Future Water Options paper, page 4.

ACTCOSS comment: Future Water Options for the ACT Region – Implementation Plan

.... excessive water use can and should be charged at a higher rate to ensure that the environmental costs associated with unfettered water use can be met. That is, if the expansion of the home swimming pool market leads to a more pressing need to develop new dam alternatives, that pricing factor needs to be reflected in the decision to own and operate a swimming pool. Or alternatively, if in future rural lessees get access to town water, any use of potable water for generating an income should be reflected in the pricing.

ACTCOSS therefore proposes that a third tier be added to the water pricing structure that would in effect be an excessive use charge. This third tier charge should cut in at usage above, for example, 500kl per annum for single households. Similar tiering in the commercial pricing of water for businesses may also be appropriate².

The ICRC accepted this logic, and three tiered water pricing was brought in with effect 1 July 2004.

A corollary to this logic is the need to ensure that basic water needs for personal and public health are priced at a level that ensures universal access. Again, ACTCOSS discussed these issues at length in its comment on water pricing, and believes that a similar principle needs to apply to any form of levy imposed to augment current water supplies. It is also vitally important that people on low incomes and those whose fixed living costs prohibit them from investing in water saving technologies are provided with assistance to allow them to reduce their consumption.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Pumping of water from the Murrumbidgee River near Angle Crossing to Googong Reservoir.

ACTCOSS believes this option holds the promise of a low cost augmentation of water supplies. But beyond that point, we only reassert that the needs of low income households must be at the forefront in ensuring equity in the cost of provision of this augmentation.

Recommendation 2: Ready to build the extensions to the Cotter, transfer of water from Tantangara or Tennant Dam, if required.

ACTCOSS does not believe that there is any social benefit to be gained from damming an unregulated river, and therefore rejects the Tennant Dam proposal. ACTCOSS concurs with the views expressed by the Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra on preference for the Tantangara option.

² ACTCOSS Comment on water and wastewater water pricing, page 4, accessible via: <http://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/submissions.html#suburban>

ACTCOSS comment: Future Water Options for the ACT Region – Implementation Plan

ACTCOSS urges the Government to ensure that the effort undertaken to research the three proposed dam augmentation options and to carry out the necessary geological surveys and consultations be matched with redoubled efforts to ensure that water usage reduction targets are met through retrofitting and incentives for landlords, home owners and businesses.

Recommendation 3: Technical analysis.

ACTCOSS is disturbed that this recommendation discussed the Tennant Dam option as though it is a fait accompli. Such statements generate the perception of this being a “done deal”, and that this consultation does not propose to do more than tick off an obligation under legislation.

Having said that, ACTCOSS believes that ongoing technical analysis is necessary to ensure that water planning continues to hold a position in ACTEW’s business plan. However, these discussions should again involve a transparent disclosure of the ACT’s obligations as a major centre and potential water supplier in the region.

Conclusion

ACTCOSS understands the need for planning for future water resources and congratulates the ACT Government and ACTEW for tackling this problem. It is important that any steps taken to secure future water resources for the ACT take into account the needs of those less able to pay for essential services.

In recent days attention has been focussed on the high cost of living in Canberra, with families facing the highest costs in the nation³. In many low-income homes there is little discretion over water usage, either because the accommodation is rented, or there is little disposable income to help invest in water saving technology. In making plans for large scale infrastructure works, it is imperative that the Government ensure that the cost burden does not fall disproportionately on those who can least afford it.

ACTCOSS is happy to meet with ACTEW to answer any queries or provide any additional information we may hold that may be of assistance.

³ “Updated Costs of Children Using Australian Budget Standards”, December 2004, Dr Paul Henman. University of Queensland QLD