



**COMMITTEE
FOR
THE HUNTER**

DRAFT LOWER HUNTER WATER SECURITY PLAN

SUBMISSION



Hunter Water
Draft Lower Hunter Water Security Plan
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23 September 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the draft Lower Hunter Water Security Plan (the Plan).

About the Committee for the Hunter

The Committee is an independent and inclusive champion for the people of the Greater Hunter and their enterprises. Representing over 60 organisations including some of the largest employers and institutions in the region, we provide a unified voice for the Hunter. Our members are drawn from the private and community sectors and all three levels of government. We come together with a shared interest in building a sustainable, prosperous and equitable future for our region. The Committee delivers on that promise through advocacy, thought leadership and providing a platform for collaborative action.

More information about the Committee can be found at www.hunter.org.au.

Access to secure, resilient and sustainable water is critical to the Hunter's economic development and community wellbeing

Water is essential for communities, business, industry, amenity and the environment. As the Committee engages with regional stakeholders on the growth and development of region, including accommodating population and economic development, access to quality, affordable and reliable water supplies is mostly assumed and taken for granted. That is until we experience the risk of water shortages and restrictions requiring trade-offs between users and uses.

A changing climate means the Hunter needs a more strategic and long term plan for water security

The region has been through drought in the past. However, we are observing droughts that are longer and more severe than in the past. Projections indicate we will experience a more variable climate into the future and an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events including drought and floods. Given the reliance of Hunter Water catchments and water supply on rainfall, our region's water system is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

- Hunter Water has acknowledged climate risk in the draft Plan by underpinning its development and recommendations with detailed, evidence and data-based climate modelling.
- The long term approach adopted in the draft Plan for the management of the water system and assets has enabled Hunter Water to engage with communities and clients on all available options, avoiding urgent decisions, extreme trade-offs and expensive capital solutions at the point of crisis.

Engaging communities on priorities for water management results in better buy in to decisions, including on contentious issues common to water providers, and fosters shared responsibility for delivery

Hunter Water has prioritised and invested in comprehensive community engagement to inform the draft Plan.

- Pending submissions to the draft Plan, the reception to priorities in the draft Plan has been positive among the community, business and in media because of these efforts.
- The outcomes of engagement have demonstrated that the Hunter community has and continues to accept their responsibility to conserve water which serves to defer, and even prevent capital solutions to secure water supply.
- The use of recycled water in drinking water has proved to be a contentious issue in some communities around Australia. The recommendation for a demonstration plant in the region accompanied by education is a sensible approach to identify and address concerns and foster community acceptance for this important option in the water management toolkit.
- The Committee supports the proposal for the Belmont desalination plant as part of a portfolio of other actions, including water conservation and recycling. We note that this decision has not been made during a time of critical water shortages when there is limited capacity to pursue other non-capital options to extend water supply. A new water supply independent of rainfall is necessary given the reliance of Hunter water catchments on rainfall, the region's exposure to drought in a changing climate and our growing population and economy.
- Environmental impacts in the construction and operation of the desalination plant must be minimised, reflecting community preferences and to meet Hunter Water's ESG obligations and NSW Net Zero 2050. Hunter Water should commit to purchasing green energy or carbon offsets to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions from operating the plant in the final Plan.

Four strategic priorities – based on community feedback and technical analysis – have been identified to achieve the goals and objectives of the draft Plan

These include: safe drinking water; making the most of what we've got; improving the resilience of the system; and water for life.

- The focus on improving knowledge sharing and increasing the involvement of First Nations people in strategic water planning is welcome. There is further scope to increase the involvement of the Hunter's Indigenous community in water management practices to benefit from the tens of thousands of years of culture and tradition and caring for country, and provide opportunities for economic development.
- The protection of water quality at the source is vital. We encourage Hunter Water to continue to engage with councils across the catchment to achieve this outcome and explore opportunities to improve community access to recreation and amenity, and sensible options for economic development.
- Hunter Water has recognised in the draft Plan that water is essential to liveable communities. The NSW government has set a benchmark for contemporary approaches to integrated land use, water planning and governance in Sydney through the Green Grid. Government has also committed to circular economy in the development of Western Sydney, which is being incorporated in Sydney Water's planning and investment in water systems. As Australia's largest regional economy and servicing a population of over one million, such focus and investment would deliver significant benefits to the State and people if applied in the Hunter.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Lower Hunter Water Security Plan. If you would like to discuss this submission please contact Alice Thompson, CEO Committee for the Hunter on +61 490 688 125 or ceo@hunter.org.au.