

## **Australian Water Congress & Expo 2014**

**Grace Hotel, Sydney  
Wednesday, 9 April 2014**

**3:50pm - 4:20pm**

Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to attend the Forum.

I am here in my capacity as President of the Australian Local Government Association or ALGA. ALGA represents the interests of local government at a national level. It is a federated body of state and territory local government associations. Through that membership ALGA represents the interests of around 560 local government authorities across Australia.

I am also here however, as Mayor of Marion in suburban Adelaide . So coming from South Australia I have an appreciation of the needs of local communities when it comes to dealing with crucial matters of infrastructure, not the least of which is the continued provision of water.

When I was asked to participate in this Congress I thought carefully about the value of my presence and whether I could do justice to such a broad topic. Local government is not an industry. We don't have the benefit of a pure and relatively narrow commercial focus. Many councils not only provide water to their communities but they also influence water use and capture through their land use planning and urban design roles and they play a central role in trying to mitigate against flooding risks, especially in regional areas. ALGA, as the national peak body for local government also engages in the inter-governmental discussions on water governance.

Local government's interests are therefore very broad. Those interests also differ between councils in different states. We live in a Federation and the role of councils in different states and within states varies. A one-size fits all approach just does not work for local government in terms of water management. Now some may see this variation as a weakness but in fact it reflects the primary strength of local government – the fact that councils can reflect local priorities and local needs and take account of the local environment.

We in local government understand that difficult balance, between adhering to strong national principles, such as the National Water Initiative (the NWI) and making sure there is enough flexibility to address local-level concerns.

Turning to the specific roles and involvement of local government. The relationship between water services, local government and the communities they serve is a complex one. There is no one story that best represents how councils work to ensure that water continues to flow and how local government plays its role in the greater national initiatives related to water. For example, some councils only handle storm water management, whereas others in regional areas can often be the water supplier. Until recently, all of Tasmania's water was managed by councils.

In fact, the vast range of issues that councils deal with in water resource management, is demonstrated every year at the National General Assembly of Local Government which is an annual conference of more than 800 local government representatives which consider important policy issues and debates motions put by delegates. I'd like to give you examples of the water issues raised by councils last year at Assembly.

**NGA Examples:**

The **Central Goldfields Shire in Victoria** raised the issue of the hundreds of small towns which are not connected to reticulated sewerage systems and the fact that small and regional communities require assistance to fund the development and maintenance of sewerage. Without the availability of reticulated sewerage population growth and viability of small towns are limited.

**Isaac Regional Council Queensland** called for Commonwealth to work with state governments to develop sustainable water strategies for regional Australia that can support growth of industry and communities and assists local governments experiencing water security and reliability concerns.

**North Burnett Regional Council in Queensland** called on the Commonwealth Government to expand current flood mitigation programmes to include alternatives to flood levees in order to increase the resilience of communities which suffer regular disaster events - as those communities without flood levees must pay much higher insurance premiums. And the **Brisbane City Council in Queensland** also raises flood risk management and calls on the Commonwealth and State Governments to work together to develop and nationally consistent framework for flood risk management.

**Gosford City Council in NSW** seeks the introduction of legislation which places a value on water reflective of the environmental and social sustainability issues incurred in water extraction.

I hope these examples give you some idea of the breadth of local government involvement in water management issues.

Under the Australian Constitution management of water is vested with state and territory governments. However, as water resources often cut across jurisdictional boundaries, cooperation between all governments on water governance arrangements is essential.

The ongoing difficulties Australia faces with water resource management led to the Council of Australian Governments, or COAG, agreeing to the National Water Initiative in 2004 and endorsing national policy guidelines to assist all jurisdictions' water planners, policy makers and interested stakeholders in developing and implementing water planning and management arrangements consistent with the National Water Initiative.

ALGA was a strong advocate for the implementation of the NWI through our seat on the Council of Australian Governments. Since then, ALGA has maintained a very keen interest in the progress of this work including through the work of the through the former COAG Standing Council for Environment and Water.

Of course, the Commonwealth must be engaged in water policy if we are to address the issues which we face and ALGA welcomes the continued engagement on water issues by the Federal Government particularly through the recent establishment of a new Federal ministerial working group to look at Australia's future water needs. The Group will identify new infrastructure projects that can deliver

Australia's water supply needs in the future. The working group brings together key areas of the Federal Government including infrastructure, water, agriculture and the environment and its first task will be to identify priorities, investment and processes to fast-track development. Chaired by the Minister for Agriculture, Barnaby Joyce, it will produce a water infrastructure options paper on proposed approaches to improve the management of Australia's water resources to support economic development, flood mitigation and respond to community and industry. The reporting date of this working group of July 2014 has been chosen so that its outcomes can be considered as part of the White Papers on Northern Australia and Agricultural Competitiveness.

Narrowing the gap between increasing water demand and water supply is one of the greatest challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to meet this challenge we need to dramatically accelerate the development of solutions that re-define our approach to water management. ALGA looks forward to the paper and potential policy options to help in Australia's future water management.

The success of future water management will be defined by efforts to reduce demands through conservation, efficiency, reuse, and the restoration of our natural systems, taking into consideration risks associated with equity and tradeoffs between competing water users.

Local government is most prominent and visible in its roles of ensuring that there is a continuous and effective supply of water; the management and mitigation of flood water; and responding after natural disasters such as floods and storms to rebuild communities. Each of these must necessarily be done in conjunction with other levels of government, which provide the policy framework and funding to support these local government responsibilities.

### **Water Sensitive Urban Design**

Less visible, but no less important, is local government's responsibility for sustainable urban design, managing open spaces, managing stormwater and drainage. Public open space is the highest water use sector for local government. The decline in groundwater availability and quality in many parts of Australia means it is important for local government to find measures to improve water efficiency, make investments in new technology, plan strategically and adopt the use of alternative water sources to ensure it can continue to provide high quality public open space facilities for its communities.

Local Government has a vested interest in improving water management and can do this through planning mechanisms, facilities, public open space management, building controls, foreshore rehabilitation, infrastructure management, drainage practices and community education.

Pressure on water supply has always existed in Australia due to the arid nature of much of the continent and the highly variable rainfall, but recent drought conditions have highlighted Australia's vulnerability to climate change. Major urban centres in Australia face increasing water shortages in the future. Efficient management of water in urban areas through Water Sensitive Urban Design incorporates water supply, wastewater, stormwater and groundwater management, urban design and environmental protection. It is probably best to illustrate the role of councils in water sensitive urban design through an early example of innovative council planning to meet the community's needs and expectations.

**Example of water sensitive urban design:**

A council example I would like to share with you is the redevelopment of Kogarah Town Square in 2003, as part of Kogarah Council's shift towards sustainable development. The Town Square site was a mix of residential apartments, retail and commercial space, a public building, an underground carpark and both public and private gardens.

Kogarah Council incorporated water-sensitive urban design concepts into the original design, ensuring the capture, recycling and reuse of all stormwater from the site for irrigation, toilet flushing, car washing and the town square water feature. The reuse system recognised the difference between 'clean' and 'dirty' stormwater. The 'dirty' run-off from the square passes through a gross pollutant trap into a storage tank and is used for garden irrigation. The design uses the landscape to filter the water, so that excess nutrients and fine particles are retained by the soil. The 'clean' stormwater (predominantly from roof surfaces) is retained in a storage tank, and passes through a screen filter and disinfection unit prior to use for higher level needs. The system saved up to 8 Megalitres of mains water annually, representing a 50% reduction in water use for the site.

All Local Governments, States and Territory Agencies are working together to adopt Water Sensitive Urban Design Principles, but individual responses require flexibility reflecting the particular circumstances at the regional and local levels. This is where local government is important, as it is the level of government which regulates local planning requirements and is in tune with the needs of its community and circumstances. Effective planning is a key component of supporting sustainable water management.

A 2011 Productivity Commission review into the urban water system identified the need for greater collaborative measures to improve water's economy of scale, and highlighted what it saw as some weaknesses in both the NSW and Queensland systems. The Local Government Association of Queensland responded by developing an industry-led review of the current situation in Queensland's water networks. The project now has the support of key water-industry stakeholders and the state government. This is just a good example of local government's readiness to assist in bringing about positive and long lasting solutions to the provision of water services.

The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), is an international association of local governments and national and regional local government organizations which have made a commitment to sustainable development. The ICLEI Water Campaign is an international freshwater management program that builds the capacity of Local Government to reduce water consumption and improve local water quality.

One thing of particular importance to recognise is the clear divide both in policy and in practicality between those communities in regional and in urban areas. The challenges are similar but at the same time present issues that require clear different responses, both from councils and from all levels of government working in concert.

Australia is a nation where the majority of people live in cities or towns, but the impact of cities and towns spreads far beyond the actual extent of developed areas, due to the need for catchment areas upstream to be able to capture and store water for urban use, and also to discharge the waters into

rivers, lakes and coastal areas downstream. The inter-relationship between the supply and discharge of water and environmental factors is not a simple one for councils.

Councils have the added challenge that they have limited resources, with rural and regional councils in a less financial position than their metropolitan counterparts. As I said earlier, water resource issues very often have considerable cost-demands attached. This is a particular concern for remote, regional and rural councils which are in most need to prepare themselves, and are the ones without the resources to do it.

This leads me to the second challenge, practical collaboration.

### **Practical Collaboration**

Whatever agreements there might be between levels of government, we need to make sure that they are not just words on paper, but based on deliverables and outcomes. There are some examples of collaborative projects which I would like to share with you, involving councils at community level working together and with the other levels of government, to improve our waterways.

#### **Examples of integrated approaches to water resource management:**

**The Cooks River Alliance** was launched in September 2011 by eight councils in the Cooks River Catchment – Ashfield, Bankstown, Canterbury, City of Sydney, Hurstville, Marrickville, Strathfield and Rockdale to address the complex problems of the Cooks River in the long term, whilst maximising the efficient use of member councils' limited resources.

The Alliance will help councils achieve sustainable urban water management in the Cooks River Catchment through organisational capacity building, and partnership building with other councils, government agencies, community organisations and local people.

This project builds on existing community partnerships, & combines environmental interpretation with traditional knowledge and culture. A place-based water sensitive homes program is designed to change household behaviour. The Commonwealth Caring for our Country initiative has provided \$2M in 2013-14

Another Caring for our Country initiative is the **Logan City Council Slacks Creek Restoration Project**. Slacks Creek is a biodiversity hotspot in South East Queensland. Urbanisation and riparian modification have resulted in marked declines in water quality and biodiversity. The Slacks Creek Restoration Project will reinstate natural hydrology and native vegetation to improve waterway health, ecosystem resilience and biodiversity with direct benefits to the local community, local environment and the health and connectivity of downstream environments including the Logan River and Ramsar listed Moreton Bay. The project is being funded \$1.6M in 2013-14 by the Commonwealth.

### **Let me now turn to the challenge of remote and indigenous communities**

Regional and remote areas present issues that come with the geography of Australia; vast distances, an unforgiving climate and small populations, so it is important to balance a national big-picture on water with local needs and knowledge. This is the ever present issue when it comes to the provision of water to remote and Indigenous communities.

The challenges for remote and Indigenous service provisions are much bigger and much broader than the principles of the NWI and form part of a larger Infrastructure shortfall and therefore, need to be approached differently.

The needs of indigenous communities have drawn the interest of Infrastructure Australia which has been looking at ways to address the national infrastructure shortfall in Indigenous communities. ALGA is pleased to have been asked to be involved in this important process, and we will continue to engage our state and territory colleagues to present a national picture, but based on local knowledge.

Addressing the infrastructure needs of indigenous communities has been a priority of ALGA for some years and ALGA's Budget Submission this year calls for a \$2 billion investment in Indigenous infrastructure, including the provision of essential and municipal services.

The delivery of such services has fallen between the cracks in our Federation because of the complexity around governance of indigenous communities. Many of those communities were seen by states and territories as being the responsibility of the Federal Government. So it was left to Canberra to provide those municipal services, or at least the funding for those services. Unfortunately the Commonwealth sees providing such services as the responsibility of local government or state or territory governments. But where there are local councils in these areas, they are amongst the least resourced councils with the least capacity to provide services. Even if they had the capacity, often the indigenous communities are located on non-ratable land.

The provision of water to these communities is a problem which will only be fixed through a collaboration between the Commonwealth and States Governments – and local government where appropriate. I hope the renewed emphasis on indigenous issues will see this problem addressed soon.

### **I want to turn now to Flood Mitigation**

This is an area of which we have heard much in recent years. While the bushfires in recent years have been caused great damage and loss of life, especially in Victoria, the really expensive disasters have been the floods in Queensland and western New South Wales.

Councils have a key role to play in emergency management and supporting community safety. Often, councils are the 'face' of disaster management and the first port of call before and after a disaster event.

The severe floods which have been experienced in many parts of eastern Australia have demonstrated the responsiveness of local councils as well as the costs involved in rebuilding communities after natural disasters. It also reinforces the need for investing in practical mitigation measures, such as flood levees, land acquisition, house raising and infrastructure hardening to

reduce the impact on communities. We also need to look at our land-use planning practices to make sure we don't allow development in flood-prone areas.

The 2010/2011 floods in Queensland highlighted the fact that councils have differing abilities to respond to disaster. The Queensland Flood Commission found that councils' abilities varied according to a range of interrelated factors: geographic differences and vulnerability to particular kinds of disaster; the priority given to disaster management; experience in dealing with disasters (for example, a number of councils in central and south-west Queensland had recently experienced flooding before the floods in December 2010 and January 2011); the resources available for disaster management; and the expertise and training of staff. Additionally, the events to which councils had to respond differed dramatically in size, severity, suddenness and duration.

Information provision, community strengthening and engagement, facilitation of planning and partnerships, and risk mitigation are among the sector's key strengths. The role of councils in preparing their communities for emergencies and the early initiation of recovery cannot be underestimated.

However, this also represents a major cost to local government. Figures have been collated to illustrate the costs incurred by councils to rebuild roads and infrastructure after flooding, drawing on the funding received by Queensland councils under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements. These arrangements provide for the Commonwealth to fund up to 75% of the cost of disasters.

In a good year, with moderate floods, Queensland councils might receive perhaps \$60-\$70 million. In 2010/11, the NDRRA funds received by Queensland councils totaled \$404 million. The figure was \$546 million in 2011/12, \$510.8 million in 2012/13 and \$548.2 million in 2013/14. That's an astonishing \$2 billion to help councils restore their local roads in just 4 years. This illustrates starkly the scale of the cost of flooding to the public infrastructure on local communities.

Now the only rational response to this problem is to invest more money in mitigation and the need for more disaster mitigation measures is an issue which ALGA is pursuing with the government. We are pressing for an increase in disaster mitigation funding to help councils to build community resilience to these events and to minimise the impacts of natural disasters on local communities.

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude by reinforcing that the issues of water infrastructure, supply, security and governance are wide-ranging. In order to progress a national strategy, all levels of government need to be engaged appropriately. I have spoken today about the challenges local government face at the urban and regional level and the balance that needs to be struck between a national ideas and engaging local knowledge. We need the principles, guidance and support of the Commonwealth, we need the cooperation of the states and we need local knowledge to provide the strongest evidence base for effective reforms. The relationship between government and water is deeply complex and varied in scope and scale, however, this is in fact a strength and not a weakness, as it provides meaningful opportunities for local collaboration.

Local government has been a strong proponent of national coordination. But we have also been leaders in innovative collaboration, as ways to put our knowledge and experience into practice. We are, however, always mindful of issues that remain unsolved, these are often the most challenging. But I believe with the good will of all levels of government, we can begin to make positive change.

Thank you very much.