

Water Directorate
Department of Land Resource Management
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WSAA submission in response to Our Water Future Discussion Paper

The Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the *Our Water Future Discussion Paper: A conversation with Territorians*.

The Water Services Association of Australian (WSAA) is the peak body representing the urban water utilities in Australia and New Zealand. Our members provide water services for over 20 million Australians.

WSAA congratulates the NT government on releasing its discussion paper *Our Water Future: a conversation with Territorians* as it develops its first overarching strategic plan for water. It is critical that governments provide opportunities for customers and the community to engage with and influence decisions that directly affect them.

The Discussion Paper comprehensively covers the key challenges and opportunities facing the water industry. It recognises the centrality of water to people, the economy and the environment; and it identifies research and innovation as essential to meeting the needs of population growth and a prosperous economy.

WSAA's brief specific comments expand on aspects of the Discussion Paper. Our comments are based on the work WSAA has been coordinating on behalf of urban water utilities and reflects common issues across Australia. Our comments relate to:

- The urban water industry's focus on customer needs and delivering customer value
- The role of the legislative and regulatory framework for good outcomes
- The importance of integrated planning
- The expanding research agenda.

Customer value

WSAA's members vision for the urban water industry is 'Customer driven, enriching life'. The vision was established in 2013. The urban water industry is entering a new era of greater engagement with, and focus on, meeting our customers' needs. Utilities are seeking to become more customer centric, where customer values and needs drive decision making. This is possible due to the solid foundations that have been built over many years to ensure the urban areas of Australia have resilient, diversified and high quality water supply.

The NT Discussion Paper is a product of good customer engagement, and refers in many places to the needs of customers and the needs of the community. WSAA suggests that in the final strategic vision the NT government may wish to bring each of the customer strands together and refer explicitly to the role of customers in the strategic policy priorities. In terms of actions, a number of jurisdictions are implementing processes to track what customers value and how their preferences change over time, and then use this to inform strategic direction and funding allocation. This could assist with *Strategic Policy Priority 1: Managing the competing demands for water*.

Legislative and regulatory framework

The Discussion Paper notes that:

The plan should be robust enough to inform legislative reform, while also framing effective means of regulating water use so as to enable its sustainable management. Many benefits will accrue from science and innovation, but they will become a reality only under the right policy framework.

WSAA concurs with the importance of policy framework and regulation in achieving good outcomes. A major focus of WSAA's work over the last year has been in leading a national discussion on the need to improve the economic regulation of the sector.

The Discussion Paper takes up this theme under *Strategic Policy Priority 5: Ensuring resilient water supplies and sanitation*. WSAA agrees with the near term and long term actions set out under this priority.

In August 2014, WSAA released a major report on *Improving the economic regulation of urban water*¹. It identified clear objectives and independent regulation as areas for improvement in a number of jurisdictions across Australia. Independent regulation is critical for meeting customer needs in the long term. It is also critical to creating the predictability and consistency in the regulatory framework that is necessary to attract private capital into the water industry. Attracting such capital is likely to be critical to meet the development aspirations for Northern Australia.

In implementing best practice regulation WSAA considers that there is a critical role for national collaboration. We do not consider it would be sensible for each jurisdiction to reinvent the wheel. For smaller jurisdictions such as NT where resources are limited we consider that national principles and standards have an especially important role to play. We consider such standards could be flexible enough to accommodate the particular needs of states and territories and that COAG should play a critical role in their development.

Integrated planning

The important role of planning is discussed under *Strategic Policy Priority 2: Foster Water Stewardship*. WSAA agrees with the near term action to:

Develop a planning framework that covers both private and public water supplies for water usage efficiency, adaptation to seasonal variability, and the longer term impacts from a changing climate to the Greater Darwin area.

¹ Improving economic regulation position statement

(<https://www.wsaas.asn.au/WSAAPublications/Documents/Position%20Statement%20on%20Improving%20Economic%20Regulation.pdf>)

This action could be broadened further to integrate water planning into wider urban planning. Too often WSAA sees that water utilities are not included fully into urban development planning at an early enough stage, and opportunities can be lost to consider amenity and how the community uses water and what they value and then planning around these needs and preference. Last year WSAA released *Occasional Paper 29: Urban water planning framework and guidelines* which serve as a basis to broaden water service planning to embrace a role in contributing to multiple objectives as mandated by state governments and our customers².

Research and innovation

WSAA is pleased to see the prominence that research and innovation has received in the Discussion Paper. Strategic policy priority 3 is Build Strategic water knowledge research and innovation. The objective of this priority is adopting and using research.


WSAA supports the priority and objective, but considers that there may be a gap that needs to be filled between the two. Translation of research into practice takes effort and does not happen automatically. This gap could be addressed in a number of ways including by:

- Adding near term actions such as:
 - 'create effective systems to share knowledge and outcomes from research across NT water-related agencies'
 - implement programs to systematically capture research outcomes, translate them into practical actions for water policy-makers and service providers, and support business to successfully integrate them into business as usual'
- Amending the Strategic Policy Priority to: 'Build and transfer strategic water knowledge, research and innovation'

Finally, we note that the research, data and knowledge focus in Strategic Priorities 3 and 5 is a focus on water quality and water supply for cities and irrigation. WSAA notes the broadening of the research agenda in a number of jurisdictions to include asset management, environment, customer service, and the impacts of mining on the environment and society.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper. WSAA commends the work of the NT Government and looks forward to the final Strategic Plan. If you have any further questions about this submission please contact me on 02 9221 0082 or mobile 0417 211 319.

Yours sincerely



Adam Lovell
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² Occasional Paper 29: Urban water planning framework and guidelines
(<https://www.wsaa.asn.au/WSAAPublications/Documents/Occasional%20Paper%2029%20Urban%20water%20planning%20framework%20and%20guidelines%20March%202014.pdf>)