WSAA NATIONAL POLICY POSITION 2022

Urban water in Australia

- The urban water industry provides essential water and wastewater services to over 24 million people in Australia's cities and towns, across some **220 urban water utility businesses**, owned by state and local governments, **employing around 30,000 Australians**.
- The industry is **highly trusted by the community** and has a strong track record of providing high quality services to ensure Australians have liveable and productive places to live.
- The water industry **invests around $6 billion annually in capital expenditure** to provide for resilient water, wastewater, recycled water and stormwater systems to cater for growing populations while protecting public health and the environment. This is expected to grow as the challenges of climate change and growth increase.
- Notwithstanding the success of the industry, there remain challenges that could impact the delivery of better outcomes for customers. Urban water is constitutionally a state responsibility. However, like health, education and transport there are an increasing number of issues that should be managed collaboratively with **direct leadership at the national level**.
- **Healthy people – healthy economy** has been a phrase often used since the COVID pandemic – urban water is central to that theme.
- The industry is committed to the **Sustainable Development Goals**, especially SDG6 (clean water and sanitation) and the need for uplift in Indigenous Australian communities around the country.

WSAA supports

- **Returning water to the COAG process**: the most essential of essential services and fundamental to life, liveability and prosperity in Australia, a focus on water at a national ministerial level is needed to ensure proactive adaption to climate change and response to growth, health and environmental issues before parochial, short term and panicked decision making is relied upon.
- **A new National Water Initiative (NWI)** with independent oversight through a body similar to the National Water Commission to accelerate progress towards outcomes that add customer and community value in the face of challenges including population growth and climate change. Ideally a new and modernised NWI would cover the following issues:
  - **A national water security framework** for defining and measuring water security. Providing safe and secure water supplies should be a priority for all governments, however there is no framework to balance the future supply of water for all end uses with future demand.
  - **All options on the table including purified recycled water for drinking** as part of a diversified portfolio of water supply options to meet the water security needs for Australia's rapidly growing cities and regional centres. A bi-partisan approach is needed to ensure the inclusion of purified recycled water for drinking as a legitimate part of water supply planning. We know through our biennial customer perceptions study that water recycling – in its many forms – is strongly supported. Dams are part of the future for Australia's water security, however they are too often politicised and put forward as a solution without due regard to transparent financial, social, health and environment expert advice.
  - **Uplift of regional, remote and Indigenous water services.** Partnerships across the industry will improve regional performance, focusing on capacity and capability as we also seek to foster connections with Traditional Owners including recognition of cultural values of water. Water quality issues continue for Aboriginal communities across many parts of Australia yet there is a plethora of government agencies and different (or no) regulations to deliver safe drinking water to First Nations peoples.

- **Commitment to liveability and health outcomes** through access to blue green grids, green space and renaturalisation of creeks and waterways. We encourage investment to
- **Effectively incorporate all water into the urban** environment to create amenity for people in growth areas and regional communities. Integrating stormwater into the urban water cycle is fundamental to liveability outcomes and a single waterway manager can overcome the limitations of accountability, planning, operations and collaboration.

Federal Government leadership, actions and areas for support:

- **Commitment to stronger funding of critical government departments** including the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC). The safety of drinking water supplies is paramount, however the length of time for improvements and revisions to the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines is holding back both the strengthening of public health and utility investment in technology.
- **Support for national research and innovation on water issues**. Australia is in a unique situation to be international leaders in water research and innovation, yet the past decade has seen a decline in investment and patchy focus areas. A strongly supported (balanced by industry, utility and other government funding) national research network between our research institutions over the long term could set up Australia to match the Dutch, Israeli and Singaporean standing in water science, technology and management.
- **Critical infrastructure and critical supply chains**. With the advent of the Security of Critical Infrastructure Act, the priority area for improvement would be for clearer two-way dialogue. At this time all traffic is into Department of Home Affairs. It would be more effective to have regular and robust two-way information exchange including through the National Coordination Mechanism (NCM). For the SA floods in early 2022 the NCM was highly effective in addressing supply chain issues and prioritising chemicals used in water treatment.
- **Liveability and health outcomes delivered by water.** Investment in blue and green infrastructure and inclusion of relevant criteria in Federal projects to acknowledge the broader role water plays in liveable and productive urban communities and to progress integrated urban water cycle management.
- **Cyber security**. Issues to be improved, primarily through the Australian Cyber Security Centre: A real time or near real time clearing house of major cyber threats that affect different sectors as information is often delayed by 24 hours or more; National education, particularly of smaller to medium businesses, on the importance of cyber security.
- **The transition to Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions**. While urban water is impacted more than most by climate change, we see opportunities to use water in smarter ways, to cut emissions and adapt to build resilience. Urban water in particular is positioned as trusted service providers to produce more and better quality green energy through waste to energy. Many water utilities in Australia have signed onto the UN Race to Zero initiative.
- **The development of hydrogen** includes a number of issues to work through relating to water. All hydrogen production pathways require water. A fundamental role for our industry is ensuring a balance of supply and demand to not exacerbate water stress, while supporting the decarbonisation of the economy.
- **The shift from a linear to a circular economy** to realise multiple economic, social and environmental benefits. As an industry we are seeking opportunities to apply circular economy principles across the roles of water: as a resource, nutrient carrier, source of energy and service.
- **A focus on skills and training**. There is a lack of recognition of water utility critical skills at a Federal level as many skill categories have been dissolved or merged. This creates an issue with recognition of core skills. There would be clear benefit in a Federal initiative to fund skill development and retention in industries deemed essential services.

About WSAA

WSAA is the peak body representing the urban water industry in Australia. Its members provide water and wastewater services to over 24 million customers in Australia and New Zealand, including many of Australia's largest industrial and commercial enterprises. www.wsaa.asn.au