

Water Action Coalition (SA)

A UNITED COMMUNITY CALL FOR ACTION

A CALL TO ACTION

We need it to survive. Water and oxygen are the two most essential resources to sustaining life. The water crisis is perhaps the most urgent ecological and human threat of our time.

We have polluted, diverted and displaced so much water from where it is needed that great river systems are collapsing and their supporting ecosystems are dying. South Australians are not alone in their increasing anxiety about their future water supplies. They are of central importance to our lives, the economy and our freshwater and marine ecosystems.

Never before has an issue provoked such wide debate and concern within communities as governments continue to make decisions based on short term needs rather than holistic solutions. Concerned South Australians are now rallying in increasing numbers to have their voices heard as they oppose these ill-considered measures.

The Water Action Coalition (WAC) is a broadly-based movement of South Australian community groups and environmental organisations that has been formed in response to growing public concern. The WAC movement is a demonstration of the determination of a diverse and concerned range of community groups to work together, and with established environmental organisations. Its aim is simply to persuade governments to respond to community concerns with well considered measures.

MISSION

The mission of WAC is to ensure a sustainable water future for South Australia. A future that ensures an equitable use of all water resources that does not compromise the health of interdependent ecosystems for future generations.

To achieve these outcomes WAC will forcefully lobby and organise events to publicly advocate for water in all its forms to remain the common property of Australia and its ecosystems. WAC will vigorously pursue legislation by all Parliaments that will:

- Secure all water in its rivers, streams and groundwater as the common property of Australia, to be managed as a common good and not traded as a profitable commodity.
- Deliver viable supply and reuse systems to all communities, city and country, without harm to interdependent ecosystems and the community.
- Ensure that water is managed efficiently and effectively for community use today and conserved for future generations.
- Respect Aboriginal knowledge of water conservation and healthy water systems, its importance to Australia's oldest culture and to modern water management.

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AIMS

The aims of WAC are to publicly support sustainable actions that will:

- Restore environmental flows to the River Murray and Lower Lakes.
- Adopt policies that reduce demand for water, reduce waste and promote conservation that recognises the finite nature of our water resources.
- Guard against exploitation of the ancient waters of the Great Artesian Basin and other natural water resources.
- Stop and reverse privatisation of surface and groundwater.
- Ensure South Australia receives a fair share of the Murray-Darling Basin water resources which respects the needs of South Australia and interdependent ecosystems.
- Maximise water supplies through stormwater harvesting in our cities as an immediate priority.
- Develop innovative ways of recycling wastewater; stop all discharges that will damage South Australia's environmental heritage and fragile ecosystems.
- Make pollution of water bodies a criminal offence.
- Prevent the construction of damaging desalination plants, especially in Gulf St. Vincent and Spencer Gulf.
- Require governments to ensure that industry and agriculture does not over-exploit water resources at the expense of interdependent ecosystems.
- Avoid large engineering solutions and maintain a bias towards minimising impact.
- Change public policies to ensure that Parliaments and Governments treat communities as equal partners in development while ensuring the sustainability of water solutions and the integrity of ecosystems both now and into the future.

WAC is motivated to protest because Parliaments have stopped listening. Its members and groups have lost confidence in major solutions adopted by Parliaments and government agencies. Many projects currently planned and already being implemented by Government will cause considerable harm to the environment and economic cost to communities when the money could be better spent on more sustainable ways to preserve water supplies and its water cycle.

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A TRUTH DENIED

WAC has listened to pleas from community groups in country towns along the River Murray and in the Lower Lakes. WAC has heard the concerns from groups in catchment areas, along with anxious appeals from residents in the suburbs of Adelaide. These concerns are well-founded; one of the longest droughts in the history of the Murray-Darling Basin is being grossly mismanaged by governments and their agencies. The current crisis is not due to the drought itself but in the management of it.

WAC accepts the long-term predictions of scientists and researchers.

Parliaments have allowed the over exploitation of water resources by agriculture, mining and inefficient industrial processes. This has resulted in not enough water in aquifers, rivers and lakes. The consequences of the mismanagement are plain to see for all South Australians.

- The reduction of flows of the River Murray in South Australia is having catastrophic effects and in many places is a disaster.
- The economies of regional and country towns depending upon the River Murray are struggling or at the point of collapse.
- The Lower Lakes and the fragile environment of the Coorong are being lost.
- Adelaide is being increasingly compromised as a viable city.
- Ancient groundwater is being further plundered risking its eventual depletion.
- There is accelerated loss of freshwater and marine natural habitats putting at risk many unique species.
- Communities will become divided as a result of water trading, rationing and increased water pricing as government emphasis has shifted to you can have as much water as you like as long as you pay for it.

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FAILED SOLUTIONS

The solutions of governments to the present water crises are limited to large-scale engineering interventions that have the potential to cause even greater harm to natural ecosystems at considerable expense to our economy. Billions of dollars are being earmarked for and spent on pipeline projects, weirs, regulators and desalination plants in a desperate bid to be seen to be doing something about water security. These water 'solutions' include privatisation and driving up its cost, will only magnify the effects. The following will result:

- Desalination will increase carbon emissions, significantly impact marine life in the Gulfs and drive up the cost of water. Substantial public funds are being wasted which could have been spent saving Adelaide coastal waters and waterways.
- The construction of so called temporary weirs and regulators at the end of the River Murray will destroy the purifying ecosystems of the Lower Lakes and the Coorong.
- Any prospect of constructive co-operation between States and their communities is at risk from the ill-conceived litigation by the South Australian government to open up the water market.
- Critical open spaces in metropolitan Adelaide, such as Cheltenham Park will no longer be available to maximise stormwater harvesting and groundwater storage.

South Australia's water crisis is one of the most urgent ecological and human threats of our time. Governments have failed to adapt to the reduced availability of water from the MDB during one of the most protracted droughts in recorded history.

Already the situation is so serious that it warrants the declaration of a State of Emergency in the Murray-Darling Basin. Further, a Royal Commission is needed into the mismanagement of water supplies by governments and their agencies. There is strong justification for motions of no confidence in water Ministers and authorities whose role was supposed to provide guardianship of the ecosystems for future generations but instead now see it as simply to generate profit and growth.

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AN UNIMAGINALE CRISIS

We never imagined that the mismanagement of the mighty River Murray would be allowed to result in the devastation of the Lower Lakes and that its waters would be replaced by carbon-intensive and environmentally damaging desalination plant, even to the exclusion of stormwater harvesting.

We have ignored the warning signs. Now in our lifetime, we have been presented with the prospect of not having enough water to sustain Adelaide's and South Australia's basic needs. What is needed now, in the face of this crisis, is a quantum change of political attitudes and direction.

All wastewater now discharged to sea, polluting Gulf St Vincent, must be recycled and diverted for productive uses by industry, vineyards, market gardens and public reserves. Stormwater currently flowing out to sea, with such disastrous consequences on the Gulf, must be harvested and cleansed in wetlands and, together with treated wastewater, stored in the vast network of aquifers beneath the city for reuse. These are our reservoirs of the future.

Rivers have been plundered for far too long at the expense of its ecology by agriculture, industry and careless use in general. Water diverted for urban and industry use is just 5% of average diversions in the Murray-Darling Basin – there are bigger fish to go after. There must be an immediate equitable sharing of the use of water based upon in-flows as intended by section 100 of the Australian Constitution. This includes inflows that are captured by private dams. The use of water must be prioritised to meet critical local needs ahead of overseas markets. Water must be kept as a common resource.

We must accept that mismanagement as well as climate change is resulting in less water flowing to our catchments. Government mismanagement has greatly exacerbated the current circumstances with their rush to short-term instead of long-term solutions that are environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. We must accept that short term engineering solutions will cause more harm to the environment and will not guarantee sustainable water supplies or a sustainable environment.

There are sustainable and democratic solutions available and the community is willing to respond.

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OUR DEMOCRATIC ROLE

WAC calls on the South Australian and Australian Parliaments and their agencies to listen to community opinion.

We ask that the fundamental human right to clean, affordable water as a common good is codified by Parliament and enshrined in legislation. We need laws that do not automatically sanction weirs, pipelines, diversion and desalination as short-term solutions. We need laws which will ensure that water from the River Murray is fairly shared. We need Parliament to again strive for laws that commit Governments to water conservation and protection, and affordable access to water for all Australian, not just those with vested interests or the most money.

Immediate legislation is needed for stormwater harvesting and wastewater recycling. We need laws that fund community actions towards rainwater collection and conservation. Our laws must leave enough water in aquifers, rivers and lakes for their ecological health. They must assist us in living in and with nature instead of over it as a path to a water sustainable future. That is our obligation to future generations.

Such legislation would set the framework for water policy that recognised social, economic and environmental obligations. Precious water which is a finite resource must no longer be consumed at the cost of the environment, and the livelihoods of future generations.

Most of all, we must accept that time is running out. What we do now will decide the fate of generations to come.

Australian Constitution Section 100 - Nor abridge right to use water

"The Commonwealth shall not, by any law or regulation of trade or commerce, abridge the right of a State or of the residents therein to the reasonable use of the waters of rivers for conservation or irrigation".