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National Competition Council
GPO Box 250B
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Submission to the National Competition Council regarding NT progress towards implementing CoAG water reforms

Dear NCC,

It is the opinion of the Arid Lands Environment Centre that the Northern Territory has not made satisfactory progress towards implementing CoAG water reforms in the arid zone.

1. Research into environmental water requirements

Clause 4 (d) of the 1994 CoAG agreement requires "that environmental requirements (for water)... will be determined on the best scientific information available and have regard for the inter-temporal and inter-spatial water needs required to maintain the health and viability of river systems and groundwater basins". Clause 9 requires that in relation to water and related research, member governments will give "higher priority to the research necessary to progress implementation of the strategic framework, including consistent methodologies for determining environmental flow requirements".

NCP assessments since 1999 demonstrate a consistent lack of attention by the NT Govt to research into environmental water requirements in the arid zone.

The NT has addressed Clauses 4 and 9 through five research projects in the Daly River region. These research projects address environmental water requirements in a tropical water system with a large surface water component. The results will not be readily applicable in the arid zone. Therefore the environmental water needs in the arid zone remain unresearched.

In the absence of a scientific basis for determining environmental water requirements, water allocation planning in the arid zone is based on a contingent policy of depleting no more than 80% of aquifer storage over a specific planning time frame (currently 100 years). In the Australian Natural Resources Atlas produced in 2001 by the Australian Land and Water Audit, the Mereenie aquifer which provides drinking water to Alice Springs was listed as over-allocated, that is, allocation for extraction exceeded sustainable yield. The 2001 NCP assessment accepted the NT Govt's stance that it considers none of its groundwater resources over-allocated because it defines sustainable yield as "the groundwater extraction regime, measured over a specific planning time frame, that allows acceptable levels of stress and protects dependent economic, social and environmental values".

Clearly the determination of "acceptable levels of stress" for arid zone aquifers should be addressed as a high priority.

Subsequent NCP assessments in 2002 and 2003 have ignored the question of research into arid zone environmental water requirements and have made no reference to the question of aquifer over-allocation, stating only that there are no stressed or over-allocated surface water systems.

Given the extraction regime outlined by the 80% policy, and the documented depletion of the Mereenie aquifer, ALEC considers that as a matter of priority the NT Govt should instigate research into environmental water needs in the Alice Springs region, specifically the degree of groundwater dependence of riparian vegetation and associated fauna in the Todd River, the Emily Plain and other floodout areas, and also the impact of the current groundwater extraction regime on a basin-wide basis, including the impact on any groundwater dependent or partially groundwater dependent ecosystems in groundwater discharge areas such as salt lakes associated with the Amadeus Basin.

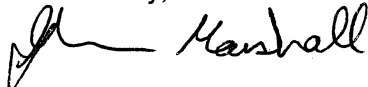
2. Public education

Clause 7 (c) requires in relation to consultation and public education "that jurisdictions individually and jointly develop public education programs in relation to water use and the need for, and benefits from, reform".

In the 2002 NCP Assessment the NT Govt's progress towards this goal rests entirely on the Water Wise NT program. Water Wise is a schools-based program of water conservation education. In itself it can in no way meet the goal stated on page 9.5 of the 2002 Assessment of deferring the need for new infrastructure such as bores and sewage treatment ponds. The Water Wise program is not an indication of adequate progress towards the requirements of clause 7 (c).

We trust these comments assist the NCC in optimizing water outcomes in the arid zone of the Northern Territory.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Glenn Marshall', written over a horizontal line.

Glenn Marshall

Acting Coordinator