



# A United Call for Action

## A CALL TO ACTION

We need it to survive. Water and oxygen are the two most essential natural resources to sustaining life. Make no mistake the water crisis experienced by South Australians, during the recent Millennium Drought, was the most urgent ecological, economic and human threat of our time. The tragedy for South Australians was that it was man-made and preventable.

We have polluted, diverted and displaced so much water from where it is needed that river systems continue to be at risk from the next drought. South Australians are not alone in their increasing community concern about where their water supplies are coming from, their cost and impact on marine environments. Water is centrally importance to our lives, the economy and our freshwater and marine ecosystems, it should not be owned by private interests.

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 for the common good.

The Water Action Coalition (WAC) is a broadly-based movement of South Australian community groups and environmental organisations that formed in July of 2009 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 for the common good.

## 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 for the common good and not traded as a profitable commodity.
- Campaign against the commercial exploitation of water through the conversion of water entitlements and licenses to tradeable commodities;
- Deliver viable water 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, environment 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 Great Southern Lakes of Lake Alexandrina, Lake Albert and the Coorong.
- 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 (MDB) water resources which respects the needs of South Australia and interdependent ecosystems.
- Maximise water reuse through stormwater harvesting in our cities and set aside required areas of land from unsuitable development as an immediate priority.
- Develop innovative ways of recycling wastewater; stop all discharges that will or may in the future 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 the Great Southern Gulfs of 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 and local needs.
- 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.

We demand the fundamental human right to clean, affordable water. This must be enshrined in legislation.

We need laws that do not sanction weirs, pipelines, diversion and desalination.

We need Parliaments to enact laws that commit Governments to conservation, protection and water equality for all Australians.



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## A TRUTH DENIED

WAC has observed how community groups in country towns along the River Murray and the Great Southern Lakes to the Murray Mouth were treated during the Millennium Drought. 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 recorded history of the Murray-Darling Basin was grossly mismanaged by Governments and their agencies. The crisis was not due to the drought but mismanagement of the water resources of the Murray-Darling Basin.

WAC acknowledges 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 had catastrophic effects and in many places was an economic, environmental and social disaster.
- The economies of regional and country towns dependent upon the River Murray continue to struggle.
- The Great Southern Lakes and the fragile environment of the Coorong were severely compromised and their long-term future is not being secured by governments and their agencies.
- Adelaide continues to be compromised as a viable city because the government has failed to restore our creeks, rivers and recycle all wastewater and stormwater as a matter of urgency.
- Ancient groundwater is being plundered risking its eventual depletion.
- There is continued 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" as it seeks to privatise water and its supply.



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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 have been spent and wasted on pipeline projects, weirs, regulators and desalination plants. The water 'solutions' include privatisation and driving up the cost of water, will only magnify the effects. The following will result:

- The Adelaide Desalination Plant and the proposed Point Lowly Desalination Plant are totally unnecessary. They will also 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 were a complete waste of money when an interstate of emergency should have been called in the basin to prevent the crisis.
- Any prospect of constructive co-operation between States and their communities continues to be at risk from the ill-conceived litigation by the South Australian Government to open up and create water markets.
- Critical open spaces in metropolitan Adelaide, such as Cheltenham Park will no longer be available to maximise stormwater harvesting and groundwater storage. Future governments will have to secure equivalent open space if Gulf St Vincent is to be saved. Golf courses, Airports, Racecourses can all be re-located.

South Australia's water crisis was one of the most urgent ecological, economic and human threats of our time. Basin governments failed to adapt to the reduced availability of water from the MDB during one of the most protracted droughts in recorded history. Adaptation should have begun once inflows began to trend down in the late nineties. They then failed to prioritise the use of water by irrigation industries to ensure adequate reserves were maintained to supply South Australia's minimum entitlement of 1850 GL during the worst of the drought.

Clearly a Royal Commission continues to be needed into the mismanagement of water supplies by Governments and their agencies. The problems with the management of the MDB are not just about science but about the way they are operated for the public good. 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 of markets.



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## AN UNIMAGINABLE CRISIS

We never imagined that the mismanagement of the mighty River Murray would be allowed to result in the devastation of the Great Southern Lakes of Lake Alexandrina, Lake Albert and Coorong, and that its waters would be replaced by carbon-intensive and environmentally damaging desalination plants, even to the exclusion of comprehensive stormwater harvesting, wastewater recycling or other less expensive sources of water.

We have continued to ignore the warning signs. Now in our lifetime, we were presented with the prospect of not having enough water to sustain Adelaide's and South Australia's basic needs to justify significant and costly engineering interventions. 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. The capability of our seagrass forests to store significant quantities of carbon makes their preservation an imperative. These are our carbon 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 2% and 1% respectively of average diversions in the Murray-Darling Basin – there are bigger fish to go after. The biggest users of irrigation water also earn the least income. There must be an immediate equitable sharing of the use of water based upon in-flows and storage volumes as intended by section 100 of the Australian Constitution. This includes inflows that are captured by private dams and used to fill extensive private channel systems. The use of water must be prioritised to meet critical local needs for water and food ahead of using water for overseas markets. Water must be kept as a common resource and appropriated by governments for the public good.

We must accept that mismanagement as well as climate change results in less water flowing to our catchments as part of normal climate variability. 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, a sustainable environment or a sustainable economy.

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. We must respond to the United Nations human right to water.

Incorporation in the 30-Year Plan for Greater Adelaide and immediate legislation is needed for comprehensive stormwater harvesting, wastewater recycling and to quarantine any required land from unsuitable development. 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. The 30-Year Plan for Greater Adelaide, already deficient in many areas, seriously omits these critical issues.

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. The Australian Constitution must be strengthened to enshrine the public's right to water and an environment we would be proud to pass onto future generations.

## 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".