



St Vincent's Ashfield Social Justice Group



Submission on Draft NSW Water Strategy

The St Vincent's Ashfield Social Justice Group supports the proposed vision in the draft NSW Water Strategy: "Sustainable water resources for thriving people, places and ecosystems, both now and for future generations" because healthy rivers, aquifers and wetlands are essential for wildlife, plants and people.

We call on the NSW Government to give greater priority to the health of our rivers and wetlands in all policy decisions.

Our laws (the NSW Water Management Act and the Commonwealth Water Act) recognise that repairing the ecological health of NSW Rivers should be of first-order importance.

At present there are too many people are taking too much water from the rivers so that the flows left for the environment, the maintenance of cultural values of rivers and for downstream communities are woefully low. Water law in NSW should aim to address over-allocation and protect, restore and provide for the ecological values and ecosystem services of the Murray-Darling Basin and to improve water security for all uses of Basin water resources. The NSW Water Strategy must match the legislated priorities for water sharing.

First Nations have inherent rights to use and manage waterways, in order to sustain cultural traditions and build sustainable livelihoods for communities. These rights are recognised in international agreements and protocols, as well as in Australia's domestic law and policy. In all water management contexts, Government must address the ongoing denial of First Nations rights and be led by meaningful consultation with, and response to, the needs of Indigenous communities.

We support improved connectivity between rivers, especially flows to the Baaka-Darling River. Connected rivers define a river basin, rivers must connect for native fish survival and drought resilience. There needs to be end of system flow targets in the rules that establish how water is shared.

Climate change is impacting our rivers and wetlands now. We can only work out how to increase our resilience if we use the most up-to-date scientific data about our water. The Government needs to include data from the most recent droughts when working out how much water to allocate to irrigators and it needs to incorporate climate predictions into all Water Sharing Plans.

We support investment in purified recycled water for urban water supplies. As water becomes scarcer our communities must be able to re-use what we have, reducing the demand for water.

We support interim floodplain harvesting licences until metering, modelling and good management rules are in place. Locking in brand new floodplain harvesting property rights before the system is working well could expose the public purse to multi-million-dollar compensation claims.

We do not support exemptions for water use by mining and irrigation industries. A recent Independent Commission Against Corruption report into water management in NSW found the Government favoured irrigation over the environment and First Nations concerns to the point where they were breaking their own laws. It is time for the NSW Government to honour the priorities of the NSW and Commonwealth Water Acts and stop allowing exemptions to the larger users of water.

Water policy in NSW requires better communication, because everyone has a stake in water. Water policy and the plight of the Murray Darling Basin is complex and difficult to engage with. More of the community, particularly in Sydney, needs to have a better understanding of what the NSW Water Strategy aims to do, and the present status of our rivers. This Water Strategy is an opportunity to explain water management better, in more places and spaces and in plain English.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this Strategy.



St Vincent's Ashfield Social Justice Group