

NSW Water Strategy
Department of Planning, Industry and Environment
Locked Bag 5022
Parramatta NSW 2124

Subject: Draft NSW Water Strategy

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft NSW Water Strategy.

As the Strategy states, the NSW Government is committed to taking action to improve the security, reliability, quality and resilience of the State's water resources. Ensuring the safety of the state's more than 400 declared dams plays an important role in every aspect of that commitment.

Dams Safety NSW is an independent regulator, established under the *Dams Safety Act 2015*, with responsibility for the safety of NSW's declared dams. Our mission is to 'Empower, support and regulate dam owners in managing dams safety risks for the NSW community'.

The majority of dams in NSW have been built to store runoff, when it is plentiful, for use in times when it is most needed. We depend on dams to supply water to our homes, businesses, industries and farms. We also depend on dams to reduce the impacts of flooding.

Given the social and economic dependence on dam structures, keeping dams safe and in good operating condition is paramount to the water supply and economic security and public safety of surrounding areas and downstream communities.

Ultimately, the safe design, construction, operation and maintenance of dams is the responsibility of the dam owner, but it is Dams Safety NSW, as the regulator, that seeks to ensure that dam owners comply with dam safety legislation.

A few recent safety events involving dams in Australia highlight the importance of dam safety and the enforcement of safety standards together with promoting good practices:

- Paradise Dam near Bundaberg QLD, is a 15-year-old dam currently having its storage capacity significantly reduced while an extensive remedial works program is undertaken. One of the more significant structural concerns has been attributed to sub-standard quality assurance during construction.
- In October 2020, Taralga Dam, in NSW's Upper Lachlan Shire, had its water level significantly reduced as a result of safety risks. This resulted in severe water restrictions being placed on the town during last summer.
- More than 6,500 victims of the 2011 Brisbane floods will be paid \$440 million in compensation after Queensland water authorities were found to have negligently managed the Wivenhoe Dam, exacerbating damage to homes.

For these reasons, the Board of Dams Safety NSW consider that the mission of Dams Safety NSW should have greater prominence in the Draft NSW Water Strategy. Currently the regulator has a single mention on page 115 associated only with Local Water utilities, an important group of dam owners however only representing about one third of declared dams.

Dams safety management, while focused on mitigating unacceptable risks at declared dams, is fundamentally about good asset management practice commensurate with the scale and value of these critical assets.

We suggest that given the criticality of dams in the overall water cycle, this strategy should have an explicit action that connects 'dam safety regulatory requirements' with 'water security and resilience' as these are inextricably intertwined. Furthermore, we recommend inclusion of our mission under the following areas of the strategy:

- *Recent Water reforms*, page 37. 'Improving dams safety management', On November 1 2019, the new regulatory body Dams Safety NSW was created, and *Dams Safety Act 2015* and *Dams Safety Regulation 2019* commenced. This reform created a clear set of minimum standards for declared dam owners and allows the regulator to audit and enforce these standards, ultimately seeking to ensure that the community are not exposed to unacceptable dams safety risk.
- *Support resilient, prosperous and liveable cities and towns (Priority 6)*. 'Regulating declared dams' – suggested actions for inclusion that are derived from Dams Safety NSW strategic plan:
 - Develop and implement a risk-based and outcome focused dams safety regulatory regime
 - Empower dam owners to achieve responsible and transparent dam's safety management
 - Work with dam owners to reduce risk below the statutory safety threshold
 - Work with dam owners to reduce their risks so far as is reasonably practicable

Should you require any further information on the Dams Safety NSW mission, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

