



## **Draft North Coast Region Water Strategy – Submission OzGroup Co-op Ltd**



### Background

Oz Group Co-op Ltd (OzGroup) is a one hundred percent farmer owned cooperative. As a single entity, Oz Group supplies the largest proportion of blueberries to the Australian market. The northern NSW blueberry industry contributes more than \$250 million in farm gate value to the region each year. Currently, there are 140 active grower members who have farms between Grafton (North), Macksville (South), and Nana Glen (West) in the Mid North Coast of New South Wales. Grower members of the cooperative provide economic contributions to the local region by ways of employment opportunities, accommodation use from workers, purchasing of materials for construction and development, hiring machinery, paying for services such as mechanical and other trades, and more.

As growers expand and diversify, we see the uptake of technology and innovation such as advanced irrigation systems which assist in monitoring moisture levels and improve precision in irrigation. Driving the uptake of technology is that the average age of the grower in our cooperative is far lower than the national Australian average in agriculture, and this is supported by the strong family-oriented culture of the businesses within our member base. Our grower members are enthusiastic about their industry and work hard to deliver a quality product to market.

Many of the OzGroup growers across the 3 LGAs (Nambucca, Clarence, and Coffs Harbour) were affected by the drought which had wide spread impact in NSW in 2019. Dams of varying sizes were empty or near-empty and growers were faced with difficult decisions to stop irrigating plants and sacrifice whole blocks. The consequences of the drought impacted not only that season but also the next season's crop as remaining plants were stressed and did not yield well. Intensive horticulture growers in this region need more access to water. OzGroup grower members provide good quality, safe, and fresh Australian-grown produce for the Australian domestic market and we know that local food security and quality is valued by the Australian consumer.

We would like to thank the Department of Planning, Industries and Environment (DPIE) New South Wales Government for the opportunity to comment on the Draft North Coast Region Water Strategy and Long List of Options.



We would like to express our support for the following options identified below separated into three different categories- alternative water sources, increase grower access to quality water on farm, and education and facilitation. We welcome the use of advanced information technology for climate predictions combining observed historical data, paleoclimate data and climate drivers and we support the continued use of advanced technology to provide climate modelling as integral in the future viability of Australian agricultural businesses.

#### Alternative Water Sources (Options #2, #6, #10, #11, #21)

Many OzGroup growers in the region have issues with salinity with either their groundwater source or surface water source so it is not a long-term option for irrigation of blueberry crops. The option to develop a portable desalination unit that can be purchased and shared amongst growers or hired locally would be extremely useful. We are supportive of trialling any research and innovation in this area.

During the drought in 2019, growers were made aware of the potential option to use water from Woogoolga Dam (council asset), however there were some issues with licensing. It was extremely unfortunate that this could not be addressed within the timeframe to provide as an emergency water source. We are in support of investigations into any water assets that can be re-purposed and used within the agricultural sector and for an increase in flexibility with licensing modifications especially during extreme events.

We are also in support of research and trials into systems of re-use water on farm with an integrated on-farm treatment system, as well as improving treatment of council recycled water for use in drip irrigation in horticultural production systems. Currently ten OzGroup growers are involved in the Coffs Harbour City Council recycled water re-use scheme however the quality of the water is low and would not be recommended by agronomists as a long-term sustainable water source in its current state. In addition, we support more research into stormwater quality and the potential for the capture, treatment, and use in drip irrigation in horticulture. As mentioned earlier, our growers are diversifying into different methods of production, for example- moving towards substrate-grown blueberries in pots to leave the soil fallow a few years before replanting. Substrate-grown blueberries require a different irrigation system and are more vulnerable to low quality water, which emphasizes the potential for improved treatment in recycled water for future use in modern systems.

#### Increase Grower Access to Quality Water on Farm (Options #14, #15, #16, #17, #30, #36)

OzGroup has also written a submission in support of increasing the harvestable rights runoff percentage and welcome further detailed research into establishing sustainable extraction limits. We are aware that previous calculations of extraction limits of water sources among the Clarence, Coffs Harbour and Nambucca water sharing plans may no longer be up to date. Growers would be willing to trial any innovative solutions into increasing water



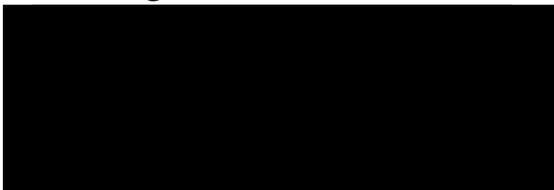
storage on farms, as many farms in the Coffs Harbour LGA are small lots (1-5ha) with limited space to build or expand a dam or place a rainwater tank. Growers are facing difficulties in navigating the water market, as trading in the local region is very limited and information on trading and trade rules can be very confusing to growers with limited English speaking and understanding of water policy. We also ask for clarity on the use of town water by commercial users and if this is an option for horticulture growers moving forward, for the rights and responsibilities to be clearly communicated.

Education and Facilitation (Options #26, #28, #29, #34, #35)

OzGroup supports the formation of a regional water reference group which can focus on local issues and include industry as well as other stakeholders. Increased access to localised training and workshops directed at growers is necessary to improve understanding of water rights and responsibilities, whether this is delivered by WaterNSW or an alternative group. We stress the need for consistent information provided to growers regarding water policy, as there has been some confusion and misunderstanding in the past and still to date. Furthermore, growers have faced constraints with interpretation of dam as development requiring consent by local Coffs Harbour City Council and therefore we would urge that this is reviewed. OzGroup welcomes the implementation of improved data collection on water use and local water source patterns to help develop more scientific evidence in development of future water policy. Growers in our member base are already involved in projects with community groups such as Landcare to address issues of sediment control and riparian vegetation. These projects and the corresponding field days are beneficial and we encourage our growers to take part, however we would highlight the need for further verification into the effectiveness of these localised projects to ensure that these works are successful long term.

We would like to thank the DPIE New South Wales Government for the opportunity to express our comments and concerns and request ongoing engagement in consultation around these options.

Kind Regards,



Oz Group Co-op Ltd