

HOW CAN IRRIGATORS REACT TO THE WATER REFORM PROCESS?

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1. Introduction

In recent years community interest in the development of the irrigation industry throughout Australia has increased significantly. Among these industries it has been the cotton industry that has been most notable in its water infrastructure and management systems development.

This has happened during a period in which governments, particularly the Federal Government, have retreated from infrastructure development. So we in the cotton industry, as well as those in other irrigation industries, have picked up the ball and undertaken massive private investment in water infrastructure development. Naturally the private investor has been most keen to invest in schemes that are not subject to government controls and legislation. As a result, we have seen particularly in Queensland in recent years, a dramatic increase in the numbers of on-farm storages built to harvest unregulated overland flow.

Now in 1998 community scrutiny of privately developed water infrastructure is higher than ever before and the development of appropriate regulation measures, if any at all, has become a major challenge for every State government.

2. The Darling Downs Vision 2000 Reaction

The group that is now known as Darling Downs Vision 2000 Incorporated had its origins in an informal gathering of Darling Downs irrigators and business people in 1994. This group met to discuss increasing scrutiny of irrigators, the fact that water resources on the Darling Downs were not sufficient to support future growth, and ways in which this community could explain to Federal and State governments its needs for water security and further resource development.

In essence Darling Downs Vision 2000 has attempted to get governments involved again in water resource development by complementing private development initiatives. We recognised:

1. that private development on its own was not the answer to our region's water needs in the future; and
2. that we still needed government involvement in providing new water for the region so as to supplement private developments and make them more reliable.

Our goal of reinvolving governments in water infrastructure development was then set.

3. The Need for Community Awareness and Support

In 1995 one of our committee members, Bruce Vandersee, had the opportunity to discuss these concerns with Paul Keating during the then Prime Minister's visit to drought affected areas of the Darling Downs. In short the Prime Minister explained that the only way to get governments of any description interested in the issue was to prove to them broad community interest and support.

DDV2000 therefore began a concentrated program of community consultation so that the Darling Downs community, particularly urban residents, could understand the water dependency of our region and the need for new water supplies in the future to sustain growth. Members of our committee spent weeks conducting one-on-one interviews with local Councils, agribusinesses and community representatives across the Downs. These meetings culminated in a series of public workshops during which a Vision statement for the future of the Darling Downs was developed.

We also found through this consultation that the community - that is the farmers, business people, local councilors, government departments and conservation groups that we consulted, were in general agreement that our strategies to achieve the vision had to be two-fold:

1. Firstly we had to ensure the efficient use of our existing supplies;
2. Secondly we should consider options to introduce sustainable supplies of new water into our area.

Whilst this public consultation and relations process has, we believe, been quite successful, as I will go on to explain a little later, we certainly learnt some lessons:

- Farmers who are used to grabbing their tools and addressing a problem as soon as it arises certainly need to be a little more patient in the public consultation and ultimately political lobbying process;
- Dealing with political parties, particularly in Queensland where we have had governments with slim majorities and in fact minority governments in recent years, is a cumbersome process unless a strictly apolitical approach is maintained;
- Capital city based public relations consultants are not always the best way to handle a regional public awareness campaign;
- Jealousies and perceptions in the community, particularly in relation to the cotton industry in our area, are real and cannot be ignored. At the same time though getting sucked into negative debate is a sure path to failure.

In recent months our public awareness program has culminated in media advertising and political lobbying that has met with tremendous community support throughout the Downs. This has been designed to take advantage of our recent State election and we believe has positioned us well for the Federal campaign.

Through this process we had both major political parties (there were only two then!) agreeing and stating publicly that water was one of the most important issues for the future of the Darling Downs. We were greatly aided in this process by our membership base and in particular our foundation sponsors.

It was interesting and rewarding for us at a time when our water allocations were being reduced to be telling politicians, and having them agree, that we needed more water for the future.

4. Achievements

So ladies and gentlemen, we like to think that our attempts to react to the water reform process and issues in Queensland have in fact involved a fairly proactive set of strategies. What have we achieved thus far in this process?

4.1 Efficient Water Use - The Conjunctive Water Use Project

Firstly in addressing the need to ensure the efficient use of our existing supplies we have been instrumental in establishing the Upper Condamine Conjunctive Water Use Project. Water users on the Darling Downs have been concerned about recent reductions in

allocation and caps on further development. We have been concerned that these measures were not based on factual information. We were in particular concerned about the Water Allocation Management Planning process and whether or not its outcomes would allow us to be more efficient and whether they would be fair and equitable.

With the State Coalition Government's call for submissions to the new State Water Infrastructure Taskforce in 1996, DDV2000 took the opportunity to propose the Upper Condamine Conjunctive Water Use Project. This detailed proposal was prepared for us by Sinclair Knight Merz and funded by our membership base. At the same time we submitted the proposal to the Murray Darling Basin Commission. As a result this three year project has a budget of \$600,000 including a contribution from the MDBC of \$275,000 with the remainder contributed by the Queensland Department of Natural Resources, the Condamine River Basin Irrigators Association and Darling Downs Vision 2000.

The Conjunctive Water Use project is all about bringing water balance modeling down to an on-farm level which can then be fitted into the bigger picture for the whole catchment. This is where the project is fully integrated with and complements the WAMP process. In fact, despite some natural initial scepticism from the Department of Natural Resources we now have integrated the macro and micro processes such that we have direct influence and input into the WAMP process, as does the Department and others in our Conjunctive Water Use Project. In short the Conjunctive Water Use Project will detail in our area what water resources are available (river, underground and overland flow); what and how resources are being used; and how we water users can improve our efficiency. In other words the project addresses our first major objective of ensuring the efficient use of our existing supplies.

4.2 The New Water for the Downs Taskforce

Water users on the Darling Downs have been told by successive governments that nothing could be done to introduce new water to our region. Not satisfied with this response, particularly from those who only think in terms of new dams, DDV2000 has begun in recent years very preliminary investigations on new water options for the Darling Downs. There is no doubt the option that has created most interest, not only during DDV2000's recent investigations but since the early 1900's, is the potential transfer of floodwaters from the Clarence River in Northern NSW.

Rather than just focus on one option though, we are keen to consider all possibilities. Our own public awareness program has uncovered significant interest in possible new water options. In fact we have learnt through this that the benefits of our public awareness and consultation process were far greater than we thought. For example the CSIRO Land and

Water Division contacted us following a presentation in Pittsworth wishing to discuss potential new water options. Our meetings with CSIRO then developed the concept of Integrated Regional Solutions. In this context Integrated Regional Solutions are all about considering the water resources and water needs of a particular region and the optimum utilisation of those resources so as to benefit all stakeholders. In considering the South East Queensland region, we were encouraged to consider the use of wastewater from Brisbane for irrigation and other purposes on the Darling Downs.

In early 1998, with this range of interesting options in mind we approached the Minister for Natural Resources in Queensland, Mr Lawrence Springborg, who, in a short period of time, offered to establish and fund a New Water for the Downs Taskforce. That taskforce, including CSIRO, SE QLD Water Board, DNR, local government and DDV2000 representatives, is vested with the responsibility of considering new water options for the Downs and prioritising them and reporting back to the Minister by early 1999. It is planned that detailed feasibility study or studies can then begin on the high priority option or combination of options.

It is most interesting to us that wastewater is a key water resource for the new millennium. Australia is unique in the world in that the majority of our population is based in a few major cities around our coastline. The populations in those cities are by far the largest water users in our country. Inland cities in North America and Europe have been using water and returning the recycled water into major river systems to be used in turn by other cities, for hundreds of years. In our major Australian cities we use water only once and then simply tip it into the sea.

Therefore, by considering wastewater reuse and other options, the New Water for the Downs Taskforce is addressing in a comprehensive manner our second major objective of identifying new water supplies for the Downs.

5. Conclusion

What I have outlined is DDV2000's experience in reacting to water reform issues in Queensland. Rather than just react though, we have been proactive in elevating water management and sustainable supply on the Downs as a major community concern and hence political issue. Water users in regions such as ours must be involved in the water reform process in its various forms. To simply wait to react to community and government deliberations is to be dead in the water. I would encourage all water users to be positive and proactive in regional water issues.

The other major conclusion that I would like to draw from my presentation is that the cotton industry has a tremendous opportunity to be an efficient water user and be seen to be solving environmental problems at the same time. In our area, use of renewed water from Brisbane for irrigation on the Darling Downs presents a win - win scenario for the whole community; a win for the economic powerhouse that cotton is to the Darling Downs, and a win for the sensitive environment in and around Moreton Bay where Brisbane wastewater is discharged at present.

Further to that, ladies and gentlemen, we believe it is about time the cotton industry is honest with itself and recognises itself as a big water user. We need to be promoting the positives of this water use and industry development (together with our genuine approaches to sustainable production and best management practices) to the broader community rather than be sidetracked by defending ourselves against minority groups. DDV2000 has always and always will be positive in its approach. We refuse to become involved in negative issues with minority groups.

A proactive rather than reactive approach to the water reform process is very much about being positive rather than negative.