



3 May 2024

National Water Strategy
Via email: nwi@dcceew.gov.au

PGA SUBMISSION

Discussion Paper – Seeking views on a future national water agreement.

INTRODUCTION

The Pastoralists & Graziers Association of WA (PGA) is a non-profit industry organisation established in 1907, which represents primary producers in both the pastoral and agricultural regions of Western Australia.

Current membership numbers equate to 84% of all pastoral leases, excluding Indigenous and conservation leases, and 21% of broadacre producers in the agricultural regions of Western Australia. This includes grain, livestock and mixed enterprises including horticulture and irrigators.

As an organisation which consists solely of primary producers from both the pastoral and agricultural regions of Western Australia, we are pleased to provide this brief submission on a future national water agreement.

SUMMARY

As an organisation which consists solely of primary producers from both the pastoral and agricultural regions of Western Australia, the PGA strongly believes that sustainable use of groundwater and surface water within Western Australia is essential for the positive development of WA pastoral, broad acre grazing, cropping and irrigation businesses, WA's regional and rural communities, and the economy of Western Australia. The economic benefits from the sustainable use of water would deliver significant positive social benefits that are much needed across the State, especially in regional and rural areas.

Whilst the PGA understands that in the 21st century, economic development is expected to be balanced against a range of other interests including Indigenous spiritual/cultural/social and environmental values, we believe that government(s) and environmental and indigenous groups need to understand that these particular spiritual/cultural/social and environmental interests need to be balanced with economic activity and development that ultimately generates the wealth that helps fund the protection of all Australians' cultural/social and environmental values.

As such the PGA does not support a water management framework which prioritises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Cultural, spiritual, social, environmental, and economic water interests and values over the broader general community, and especially at the behest of WA's broad acre grazing, cropping, horticulture and pastoral industries.

ISSUES

Transparency in decision-making is fundamental for water users to have confidence in governments and government processes. Water users must be able to understand the impact(s) to the reliability of their entitlement due to government policy decisions, and other relevant impacts. Governments should have a framework developed to provide information that are deemed important to irrigation farmers and communities so water users can assess risk and enter consultation processes in good faith.

The PGA believes there already exists an extensive array of Commonwealth and Western Australian regulatory frameworks that any water development proposal or current project will have to navigate before being approved along with a list of caveats. The PGA believes that these regulatory frameworks are more than adequate. It could be argued however that there is need for streamlining of the regulatory frameworks, especially where there are clear overlaps which result in duplication, unnecessary red tape and the associated waste of time, money, and resources for both proponents and regulators.

The PGA also believes that stock and domestic entitlement is also a landholder private property right that needs to be better reflected in the NWA. All jurisdictions should ensure there is a robust framework that recognises a clear hierarchy of water access entitlements that includes stock and domestic, urban water supplies, irrigation, intensive agriculture (feedlots), tourism and extractive water use within the water resource planning framework, including proper and robust extraction limits.

Further, there have been no determinations of native title that have given rights to water (in terms of exclusive, ability to control or to take in quantities or restrict taking of water). There have been some deals done with the State (WA) as part of non-native title settlement outcomes (i.e Yamatji Nation) where the State agreed to allocate certain water rights to a native title holder entity. As such this is not a native title right, but a normal water right under law.

It is the position of the PGA that indigenous people, like any other group of people, need economic development opportunities and the range of individual and community benefits that tend to naturally flow from participating in economic activities.

However, the PGA also considers the Rule of Law and therefore strongly supports the requirement for traditional owners to apply for a water licence like any other water user and that all water licensing policies and regulations would also apply, including those for water, environment, and heritage.

The PGA strongly supports the use of scientific data as the only basis of sustainable water management. The PGA believes that a robust and transparent monitoring regime that is clearly articulated, fit for purpose, and communicated to businesses is an essential underpinning of any Adaptive Management system, and expects that hydrological, environmental, and cultural/social parameters to be monitored.

CONCLUSION

For primary producers, the establishment of secure private property rights is the cornerstone that has underpinned much of the progress achieved under the National Water Initiative (NWI). It is imperative that entitlement rights and security of property rights are sufficiently considered and secured in the development of the NASWU, especially in the context of multiple policy changes attributed to climate, social, and Cultural considerations.

The PGA supports and encourages fit-for-purpose measures and guidance to ensure the efficient management of water. National water reform has the potential to support all jurisdictions equally to develop secure water supplies, however the PGA remains to be convinced that a renewed National Water Initiative would provide material benefits for the State, in terms of more significant Commonwealth investment in water management or helping to improve Western Australia's water resource management.

Further the PGA does not support the inclusion of the Nature Positive Agenda where Aboriginal communities should be at the forefront of environmental and cultural heritage protection.

The PGA welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence on this important issue.

Yours faithfully



Tony Seabrook
PGA President