

After the deluge

Gary Pead MRICS

Australia's wheat bowl needs more than a token bail-out to rescue it from environmental disaster, warns Gary Pead MRICS

Climate change has focused minds in Australia and earned the world's largest island a reputation as a pioneer in matters of water futures. But these plaudits are premature. Despite epic floods, which have seen an area the size of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland combined under water, the country remains in the grip of an epic drought.

The recent rains in the Murray Darling area have certainly been a help, but experts say that even this deluge is not enough to save the river system unless governments make the right decisions on water rights buy-back schemes immediately.

The importance of this river system – and the importance of agriculture to Australia – cannot be overstated. Australian farmers export 80% of what they produce and 40% of grain and livestock production is grown in the Murray Darling region. This river system has a total catchment area of 1,062,000 sq km, which is one seventh of Australia's total land mass. As a comparison, this is the size of Europe and England combined. It has been depleted of water for agricultural and urban water use along its 3,375 km and has now stopped flowing completely.

The mouth of the Murray Darling River system is the wetlands of the Coorong, in the state of South Australia. These wetlands have almost dried up and are becoming acidic. Without massive and effective intervention there is grave risk of the permanent destruction (within months) of a huge and unique ecosystem.

The studies and recommendations for solutions have been going on for years and the pre-eminent Cullen Report says that to maintain the essential business of existing agriculture, and allow sustainable environmental flows to keep the river system from dying, Australia needs to double its existing storage capacity and halve the existing take-out of water by agriculture.

Common sense

Who will win this battle? Will it be short-term business interests (agricultural pursuits that will die when the river dies anyway) or the environment lobby and common sense? Will government allocate adequate funding to solve the problems properly?

The enormous challenges of geography, climate, size and distance in Australia are compounded by cooperation difficulties between multiple levels of governments across eight separate states and territories.

This is a country that could not agree to build an effective standard gauge railway connecting all mainland states until the mid-1960s.

Rural droughts and city water storage shortages across Australia had, until now, reduced stored dam capacity as low as 10%, resulting in governments restricting water use, establishing water use commissions, and even distributing four-minute egg timers to educate households about shorter showers.

Larger projects include about AUD\$11bn for seven newly completed desalination plants, with more to come. These are large-scale state government driven water infrastructure projects necessary to beef up city water supplies.

All these plants have been built in the past few years based on panicked decisions predicated on fears that Australia's worst drought may not end. But mass desalination does not contribute in any way towards environmental solutions to save the Murray Darling River system, and targeting resources towards populated cities suggests that governments are politically not environmentally motivated.

Tremendous kudos

Given the emergency of the ecological situation and the dire need to shore up agricultural prospects in the Murray Darling area, Prime Minister Rudd's initiative provided him with tremendous kudos. Looked at closely, though, the Water Futures Policy is tokenism. The questions now are will the funds evaporate in the aftermath of the latest rainfall, and are they adequate enough anyway, considering they are to be spread over ten years?

A AUD\$12.9bn spend in a decade is demonstrably pathetic when compared to an earlier major water project. In 1896, Premier Sir John Forrest in the state of Western Australia built a 530 km water pipeline 400m uphill to provide water from Perth to the Goldfields in the desert.

A AUD\$12.9bn spend in a decade is demonstrably pathetic when compared to an earlier major water project.

In 1896, Premier Sir John Forrest in the state of Western Australia built a 530 km water pipeline 400m uphill to provide water from Perth to the Goldfields in the desert.

The cost of that project in today's money is AUD\$25bn. Commitment of this sort is what most Australians want from government.

Until this happens, Australia will remain the driest continent on earth with the world's highest per capita use of water, as well as the world's highest production per capita of carbon emissions.

On no account should Australia be lauded (yet) as a global leader in environmental water future matters. That is a busted flush. We need to fast mend our ways or stick to cricket.

After the deluge

Gary Pead MRICS

Australia's wheat bowl needs more than a token bail-out to rescue it from environmental disaster, warns Gary Pead MRICS

Climate change has focused minds in Australia and earned the world's largest island a reputation as a pioneer in matters of water futures. But these plaudits are premature. Despite epic floods, which have seen an area the size of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland combined under water, the country remains in the grip of an epic drought.

The recent rains in the Murray Darling area have certainly been a help, but experts say that even this deluge is not enough to save the river system unless governments make the right decisions on water rights buy-back schemes immediately.

The importance of this river system – and the importance of agriculture to Australia – cannot be overstated. Australian farmers export 80% of what they produce and 40% of grain and livestock production is grown in the Murray Darling region. This river system has a total catchment area of 1,062,000 sq km, which is one seventh of Australia's total land mass. As a comparison, this is the size of Europe and England combined. It has been depleted of water for agricultural and urban water use along its 3,375 km and has now stopped flowing completely.

The mouth of the Murray Darling River system is the wetlands of the Coorong, in the state of South Australia. These wetlands have almost dried up and are becoming acidic. Without massive and effective intervention there is grave risk of the permanent destruction (within months) of a huge and unique ecosystem.

The studies and recommendations for solutions have been going on for years and the pre-eminent Cullen Report says that to maintain the essential business of existing agriculture, and allow sustainable environmental flows to keep the river system from dying, Australia needs to double its existing storage capacity and halve the existing take-out of water by agriculture.

Common sense

Who will win this battle? Will it be short-term business interests (agricultural pursuits that will die when the river dies anyway) or the environment lobby and common sense? Will government allocate adequate funding to solve the problems properly?

The enormous challenges of geography, climate, size and distance in Australia are compounded by cooperation difficulties between multiple levels of governments across eight separate states and territories.

This is a country that could not agree to build an effective standard gauge railway connecting all mainland states until the mid-1960s.

Rural droughts and city water storage shortages across Australia had, until now, reduced stored dam capacity as low as 10%, resulting in governments restricting water use, establishing water use commissions, and even distributing four-minute egg timers to educate households about shorter showers.

Larger projects include about AUD\$11bn for seven newly completed desalination plants, with more to come. These are large-scale state government driven water infrastructure projects necessary to beef up city water supplies.

All these plants have been built in the past few years based on panicked decisions predicated on fears that Australia's worst drought may not end. But mass desalination does not contribute in any way towards environmental solutions to save the Murray Darling River system, and targeting resources towards populated cities suggests that governments are politically not environmentally motivated.

Tremendous kudos

Given the emergency of the ecological situation and the dire need to shore up agricultural prospects in the Murray Darling area, Prime Minister Rudd's initiative provided him with tremendous kudos. Looked at closely, though, the Water Futures Policy is tokenism. The questions now are will the funds evaporate in the aftermath of the latest rainfall, and are they adequate enough anyway, considering they are to be spread over ten years?

A AUD\$12.9bn spend in a decade is demonstrably pathetic when compared to an earlier major water project. In 1896, Premier Sir John Forrest in the state of Western Australia built a 530 km water pipeline 400m uphill to provide water from Perth to the Goldfields in the desert.

A AUD\$12.9bn spend in a decade is demonstrably pathetic when compared to an earlier major water project.

In 1896, Premier Sir John Forrest in the state of Western Australia built a 530 km water pipeline 400m uphill to provide water from Perth to the Goldfields in the desert.

The cost of that project in today's money is AUD\$25bn. Commitment of this sort is what most Australians want from government.

Until this happens, Australia will remain the driest continent on earth with the world's highest per capita use of water, as well as the world's highest production per capita of carbon emissions.

On no account should Australia be lauded (yet) as a global leader in environmental water future matters. That is a busted flush. We need to fast mend our ways or stick to cricket.