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People for A Living Moorabool



PALM

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30th November 2022

To: Essential Services Commission

Water Price Review 2023 team

Re: Southern Rural Water Price Submission 2023

To whom it may concern,

People for A living Moorabool (PALM) is a grass roots group which has been advocating for over a decade for increased environmental flows for the Moorabool River, a river which is acknowledged as the most flow stressed in Victoria.

PALM has for many years been concerned about the impact and growth of private dams in the Moorabool Catchment. The catchment has one of the highest private dam capacities relative to inflows of any Victorian catchment. Continued dam development, especially on watercourses, serves to erode the gains in environmental flows which have been secured for the river through sustained advocacy by groups like PALM.

In response to *Action 4-13: Review of water resource risks in small, dry, peri-urban catchments in the recent Central and Gippsland Sustainable Water Strategy*, PALM conducted a study into the growth of private dams in the Moorabool Catchment. The preliminary results show an upsurge in private dam development, many on DELWP designated water courses, which appear not to have gone through a SRW licencing process.

This has driven deep uncertainty about the capacity of Southern Rural Water to both monitor and enforce compliance on potentially unauthorised dam construction or enlargement.

PALM acknowledges Southern Rural Water (SRW) has recognised the issue in the Moorabool Catchment and is currently directing resources toward resolving the status of the large number of dams of concern that we notified it about.

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However, it should not be up to groups like PALM to monitor Victorian catchments for unauthorised dam construction.

It is vital that SRW properly resource compliance and monitoring across all catchments for which it has responsibility. As they clearly stated in their pricing submission:

“We recognise the important role we play as stewards of water resources, ensuring that we manage them sustainably for the long term.” *SRW Price Submission 2023 Page 10*

Yet relatively unfettered private dam proliferation, obviously SRW’s stewardship responsibility, is undermining the SRW ability to manage our water resources “sustainably for the long term”.

Both monitoring and compliance are vital tools in supporting that stewardship role. It is evident by SRW’s own admission that proper application of both has not been occurring in the Moorabool River Catchment, particularly with regard to private dams.

People for A Living Moorabool believes this is substantially an issue of resourcing. PALM notes that a reported assault on a SRW officer in the Moorabool Catchment has meant an accompanying investigating officer is now standard practice during farm inspections. The effect has likely been additional capacity restraints on the number of compliance actions able to be performed.

There is a reference to this within the SRW submission:

“Since setting the benchmark in 2017, SRW has experienced a significant increase to business costs (including real wages growth, **higher compliance costs from an uplift in health and safety**, cyber security arrangements and significant increases to insurance costs) which have resulted in our operating cost base exceeding the benchmark allowance” (*SRW Price Submission 2023 Page 23*).

Under the section “Sustainable water” on page 62 of the submission, the organisation clearly states the outcome it is seeking is that: “Allocations are managed in a sustainable way for customers, community, and the environment to ensure a secure future.”

The commitment is to: “effective resource management that maximises the water available for consumptive use, community, and the environment.”

Included as one of the four “proposed performance measures and targets” on which SRW will focus is the “Investigation of unauthorised use – All”. Yet none of the following 7 ways of achieving those outcomes relate to unauthorised use.

The reference to further detail in Appendix C relates the following:

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Output: Investigation of unauthorised use

Why: Check for unauthorised use of water: compliance is a government priority

Measure: Percentage of all reported/observed incidents investigated within 1 week

Yet outside the irrigation districts funding for increased monitoring and compliance activities is not mentioned. More timely investigations are welcome but this does not address the main issue, that monitoring levels must be substantially improved.

It is vital for the future of rivers like the Moorabool that all 'water-take' actions in catchments are captured by proper process. We ask that the Essential Services Commission seek clarification from SRW as to how they plan to address what appear to be obvious short falls in past monitoring and compliance capacity.

If this ultimately requires a reappraisal of the proposed pricing structure, PALM supports it consideration.

Regards,

Cameron Steele

Co-ordinator

People for A living Moorabool