



Hon. Colin Tincknell MLC

Member for the South West Region

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Dear Editor

WATER FIGHT IN FOOD BOWL

Recently I met with food producers at their properties in Manjimup to discuss three issues of concern to them:

- Disallowance of regulations for water licence fees (eg \$6,668 for renewal).
- Water allocation policy blocking new dams for food production.
- Water issues in the pending *Water Resources Management Bill*.

The Manjimup and Pemberton areas are regarded as the 'food bowl of the South West', with the value of food production twice that of the Ord River irrigation district. The success of food production is based on adding water from 'farm dams' collected in winter to the rich karri soils in summer. The success of this proven 'water for food' production model faces three threats.

The Labor State Government has launched a push for 'cost recovery' of services provided by the water programs conducted by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation. The water programs in the Department employ 447 staff and cost \$87 million, but don't supply a drop of water to anyone. Minister for Water Dave Kelly has sent his Department on a roadshow to shop around what can be described as a 'water tax grab'.

The water licence fee schedule would require a Black Truffle grower in Manjimup using 17 megalitres of water from their own dam to pay the same \$6,668 for a water licence renewal as the Ord Irrigation Cooperative licenced to use 246,300 megalitres from the Ord River. A marron producer in Manjimup with a water licence for 13 megalitres would pay the same \$6,668 for a licence renewal as the Water Corporation licenced to use 53,800 megalitres from Serpentine Dam.

There are 13,000 water licences for dams and bores in WA, but this absurdly high 'one-size-fits-all' fee will hit small family-based farmers the hardest. The food producers I met with regard renewal of a water licence fee as a 'rubber stamping' process. They say a Driver's Licence is a tested benchmark for Government service; being \$89.15 for a New Applicant Fee and \$149.50 for Licence Renewal for five years. Self-supply water users have been saying since 2007 these benchmark fees could be applied to water licences. In my view the proposed \$6,668 fee for licence renewal is grossly unfair, especially when considering the self-supply water users pay for their own dams, which can cost more than a farm house.

A similar water tax grab by the former State Labor Government was twice disallowed in the Legislative Council in 2007 and 2008. I will be moving a disallowance motion for the regulations enabling the initial new fees for mining, to kill the water tax grab at birth, before it can spread to agriculture. I encourage the Liberals, Nationals and Greens to join us in the vote on disallowance.

State and Federal Labor Governments have been pushing the National Water Initiative for more than a decade, the core of which is to promote water markets. This has proven to be a failure in the Murray-Darling Basin, with \$6 billion in subsidies wasted so far, and with an associated massive increase in 'red tape'. The WA Government is forcing a water market onto the 'food bowl of the South West' in the form of a Southern Forests Irrigation Scheme. For Christmas 2017 the McGowan Government closed fourteen sub-catchments of the Warren and Donnelly Rivers for new water licences to favour the Southern Forests Irrigation

1st Floor, *Sterling House*, 8 Parliament Place, WEST PERTH, WA, 6005

Phone: (08) 9486-8106

email: colin.tincknell.mlc@mp.wa.gov.au



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Scheme. This denied food producers the opportunity to construct new self-supply dams last summer, and they are still being denied as we approach another dam construction season.

The Southern Forests Irrigation Scheme, like the Murray-Darling, is not a viable commercial operation as it requires \$19 million in State Government subsidy and \$40 million in Federal Government subsidy. The Southern Forests Irrigation Scheme has twice failed to attract funding under the National Water Infrastructure Development Fund.

In Manjimup I visited several properties where landowners are being blocked from accessing abundant water on their properties to construct new dams for self-supply water for avocado and other plantings. These constraints on self-supply water must be removed. I will be watching the National's State Conference in Manjimup in October to ensure Federal Minister for Infrastructure and Transport Michael McCormack doesn't issue a cheque for \$40 million to an Irrigation Scheme that has twice failed to meet assessment criteria for funding.

Since 2007, consecutive Labor, Liberal, Nationals, and now Labor again, Ministers for Water have claimed that a *Water Resources Management Bill* is imminent that will consolidate several water-related Acts into one. Over these eleven years there have been multiple discussion papers on what may be contained in the *Bill*. Key issues for food producers include whether spring-fed and run-off dams are to be wrapped in the red tape of licensing and associated fees. And if they are to be regulated, so should tree plantations be required to have a water licence. In Manjimup I was shown how Blue Gum plantations can cause a neighbour's dams to dry up.

Our party's Members of the Legislative Council will also be vigilant regarding what provisions there will be in the *Bill* for statutory involvement of stakeholders in water resource management at peak and local level. Labor, Liberal and Nationals Ministers for Water have failed to appoint a State Water Resources Council provided for in 2008. They have also failed to appoint any local Water Resource Management Committees provide for in 2000. Consequently, none of the water plans in WA are statutory Water Resource Management Plans. The water licences issued in relation to the non-statutory plans are open to challenge and thus don't provide necessary security for food producers, miners and other water users.

The successive Ministers have ignored the will of the Parliament and stakeholders. Labor, Liberals and Nationals are compromised by their neglect of applicable water legislation. They can't be trusted with new legislation to manage our State's vital water resources. Given the importance of the *Water Resources Management Bill*, it must be issued as a 'Green Bill' in draft form for wide consultation with stakeholders and public comment to a Select Committee of the Legislative Council, and I will move this thorough process be used.

Hon. Colin Tincknell MLC

Member for the South West Region
Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party
8 Parliament Place
West Perth WA 6005
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