

# GREAT ARTESIAN BASIN COORDINATING COMMITTEE

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## SUMMARY OF MEETING OUTCOMES, GABCC 35, Brisbane 17-18 March 2016

### *Great Artesian Basin Strategic Management Plan*

The main item for this meeting was revision of the Great Artesian Basin Strategic Management Plan (the Plan). The Great Artesian Basin Coordinating Committee (the Committee) discussed the tone and scope of the draft plan, the timeline for its delivery, and the process for consultation of Basin water users.

The plan is to be a principles-based document to provide guidance on best practice to anyone with an interest in the Great Artesian Basin, including communities, scientists/researchers, industry, users, regulators and governments. This will encompass broader natural resource management issues related to delivery of Basin water, and seek balanced (triple-bottom-line) outcomes to express the 'health' of the resource.

Drafting of the plan will make good use of the extensive development work and consultation which has previously been undertaken. The document will help to identify problems with current practices, and opportunities to improve management of, or the return on, Basin water use.

It provides an opportunity to emphasise that among the three major Basins in eastern-central Australia, the Great Artesian Basin is rarely placed high on the agenda. This downplays the reality that the Basin constitutes the only reliable water resource over much of its area, and the level of settlement, industry and economic activity in that area is only possible because of Basin water.

The plan provisions need to foster 'secure and managed access' to Basin water, in which:

- All users know their roles and responsibilities, which are clearly defined
- All use is accounted for
- Waste is eliminated
- Rights are flexible and negotiable
- Infrastructure is maintained, with clear responsibility for costs.

The ultimate aim will be to develop collective approaches to using Basin water within 'acceptable resource condition'. This will necessitate all jurisdictions working to develop processes and practices to establish baselines, desired outcomes (thresholds), and consistent monitoring and reporting, to enable a whole-of-Basin change-trigger-response approach.

Over the next 15 years the plan will help to shape measures of achievement, focused on outcomes/ net benefit to support annual reporting and budgetary processes. This will include: water accounting and reporting frameworks which can be harmonised over time, accounting for stock and domestic use, addressing 'non-maintained infrastructure' with a collaborative and educative approach, and a functional healthy water market for the Basin, moving gradually towards trade-ability.

A draft is expected to be available for public comment in July 2016.

Most Basin water delivery infrastructure is privately owned, and governments need to work in collaboration and partnership with users. Community input and support will be vital if the plan is to deal adequately with contemporary issues and public/private partnerships over the next 10-15 years. Accordingly, the consultation process needs to be sufficiently inclusive to address community, social and economic issues, and this needs to occur early in the process rather than at the end.

In particular, the Committee emphasised the need for consultation processes to be well promoted and supported, to be staged over a longer period, to be efficient by combining with other stakeholder events and making use of collectives of local government bodies and natural resource management organisations, to have appropriate

attendance by jurisdictions, and to offer ample opportunities for participation to those who are unable to attend face-to-face events.

### ***Great Artesian Basin Economic Output Report***

The Committee received an update on the Great Artesian Basin Economic Output Report, which is being developed in parallel with the new Strategic Management Plan. This report will document current and future water use and users in the Basin, and the value of industries or sectors which depend on Basin water. A draft of this eagerly anticipated report is expected in early May, and its findings will be reflected in the revised plan.

### ***Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative (GABSI)***

The Strategic Management Plan is a vital tool to shape options and influence decision-making beyond the GABSI4 program, by highlighting the true value of the Basin to the national economy, the value of water distribution infrastructure, and the consequences of not building on the achievements of GABSI to date.

Approximately 500 bores and 6,000km of bore drains are yet to be rehabilitated, and improvements to infrastructure need to continue to minimise water wastage, improve land management practices, and reduce the impacts of pest animals and plants near bore drains.

This requires a long-term, economically viable, and reliable way to maintain infrastructure into the future, as a public-private partnership. In conjunction with the plan and the Great Artesian Basin Economic Output Report, the Committee will be considering a range of future funding options.

### ***Great Artesian Basin Bore Data and audit***

The Committee received and discussed two presentations which examined the extent and condition of Great Artesian Basin bores. These studies contribute to our understanding of the value of infrastructure in water delivery systems as the 'other side of the coin' to economic value of Basin water to the nation.

The Great Artesian Basin bore data report requires some additional data before being finalised. The bore data will contribute to both the revised plan and the Economic Output Report.

The recent audit in South Australia, undertaken to inform compliance policy development, has also played a key educational role for users, and other jurisdictions have been encouraged to follow a similar path.

### ***Developing knowledge of the GAB resource***

An additional presentation outlined the Geoscience Australia Hydrogeological Atlas of the Great Artesian Basin, which will increase understanding about the Basin resource.

The Committee was made aware that the Geoscience Australia groundwater group is leading a workshop in April on Great Artesian Basin research needs. This workshop is an opportunity to address key research and monitoring requirements to plug gaps in information and knowledge, and to support management over the next 10-15 years.

Technical input into the plan will be strengthened by formal inclusion of the Office of Water Science (OWS) in the revision process. The bioregional assessment program being conducted by the OWS is likely to reveal additional knowledge gaps, although the timing for completion of the assessments will not enable new information to be included in the revised plan.

The Committee agreed to invite Travis Gotch and Dr Rod Fensham to make a presentation to the Committee on extensive recent work on Great Artesian Basin springs.

The Great Artesian Basin Resource Study update (draft 2015) has been circulated for comment, and will be published on the Committee website in the near future.

The Great Artesian Basin Research Bibliography is still to be updated, and will be used to keep abreast of research reports which are useful for Basin management.

### ***Governance and future arrangements***

The Committee had a conversation about options for future governance models, including increased coordination with arrangements for the Lake Eyre Basin (LEB). This recognised spatial overlap, stakeholder overlap and a degree of hydrological connection, as well as notable differences between the respective arrangements at present. The Committee will continue to explore options, in parallel with development of the new plan.

## ***Annual Report 2014/15***

A draft Annual Report was circulated and will be published on the Committee's website after some final edits.

### ***Communication***

The Committee discussed the Strategic Management Plan fact sheet, the Great Artesian Basin Coordinating Committee fact sheet, website activity and updates, publications, and the Great Artesian Basin poster map digitisation.

It was agreed that a consistent and enduring single point of telephone contact for the Committee would be established and this has since occurred (1800 900 090).

### ***Reports in brief***

#### **Jurisdiction Reports**

*Queensland* - water legislation, issues raised in the review of the Water Resources Plan (WRP), and GABSI4 roll-out.

*South Australia* - GABSI4 projects, Great Artesian Basin monitoring program, compliance program, guidelines for managing the mining-water interface, CSG and large coal projects, Desert Jewels (Great Artesian Basin springs) project, co-management of parks, and other springs survey information.

*NSW* - Departmental changes, GABSI4, Eastern Recharge Groundwater Source, and Great Artesian Basin Groundwater Status Report.

*Northern Territory* - draft Water Allocation Plan, and progress on the regional monitoring program for the Great Artesian Basin.

#### **Community Reports**

*South Australia* – focused on issues and process for the revised Strategic Management Plan.

*Queensland* - progress in rolling out GABSI4.

*Regional agriculture* - GABSI4 landholder satisfaction, support for aligned but independent governance for Great Artesian Basin and Lake Eyre Basin, co-investment to share cost burdens, and valuing from different sector interests.

#### **Sector Reports**

*Minerals* - focused on the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* 'water trigger'.

*Indigenous* - attendance at a Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) meeting in Cunnamulla in May 2016, and review and amendment of information and education materials to ensure culturally appropriate language.

*Local Government* - follow up on tourism data for the Economic Output Report, and engagement of Australian Local Government Association in the Strategic Management Plan review process.

*APPEA* - reporting of 'non-associated water' in the Queensland Water Resource Plan review, and related matters.

*Environment* - focused on opposition to coal-seam gas and large coal projects.

#### **Next Meeting**

Planning is now underway for a special Committee Meeting to be held prior to public release of the draft Strategic Management Plan, most likely at end May-early June 2016 in Canberra.