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To whom it may concern

Re: Macquarie-Castlereagh Regional Water Strategy – Public Exhibition 2 Submission

The Central NSW Joint Organisation Board (CNSWJO) thank the Department of Planning and Environment, Water (DPE, Water) for the opportunity to make comment on the Public Exhibition 2 draft of the Macquarie-Castlereagh Regional Water Strategy (the Strategy). We also thank you for the opportunity to meet face-to-face with our members in Dubbo on 8 November.

The region has welcomed the engagement by DPE with the CNSWJO and Councils in the upper Macquarie in the development of this important Strategy. Where inter-government collaboration on regional water management has long been the missing piece, it is a major step forward to have town water security recognised in the strategic framework for water.

We thank the Department for working with the CNSWJO and its member Councils to reach a shared understanding of the challenges for town water security and to identify options to address these in the Strategy. While it is generally agreed that more work is needed on the economic value of town water, it is assumed that Action 1.1 may provide this opportunity.

Further, we look forward to the sharing of data and modelling with Councils for local level planning. It is understood that this is being addressed through guidance on town water security for strategic planning by local water utilities being developed through the Town Water Risk Reduction Program. This alone will reduce duplication and costs in local level planning by ensuring one-source of truth used by both the department and Councils.

Where our member Councils will make separate submissions, the CNSWJO Board provides the following high-level feedback on the Consultation Paper.

While today the region battles with flooding on a scale not seen before, we know too well that now is the time to be planning for and implementing water security solutions in preparation for the next drought- which will come.

The CNSWJO Board urges the State Government through this Strategy to use this time of abundant water to work closely with Local Government to implement the options identified to secure town water

supplies and make these solutions a reality. The risks are too great, particularly for the large regional centres of Bathurst and Orange, not to act now. It is all too easy through changes in the political cycle and following periods of extreme rainfall to become complacent.

The slide provided as an attachment is from the CNSWJO Board Strategic Planning Conference held in Orange on 25 August 2022. The Conference was attended by newly elected Councils and Councillors from across the region who identified water security and water for productive use as the priority head and shoulders above all other priorities for the region.

In terms of the prioritising of actions detailed in the Consultation paper, it is suggested that if work on Action 1.6 is contingent on completion of Action 1.1 it needs to be progressed as a priority. Based on the region's experience through the droughts, Action 1.6 is critical for the regional centres of Orange and Bathurst and surrounding towns and villages, given they came so close to running out of water in 2020.

Through necessity our Councils have achieved great outcomes in water efficiency in the past (far greater than those in metropolitan Sydney, for example). Work continues to improve water efficiency through programming that seeks to reduce non-revenue water loss in water distribution systems and achieve greater water and energy efficiencies and cost savings for communities. The focus is very much on 'doing more with less,' optimising existing infrastructure where at all possible and delaying the need for water infrastructure augmentation.

However, this region knows from first-hand experience, it's work on the Centroc Water Security Study (2009) and recent modelling through the Regional Water Strategies that it needs a multi-source approach to water security. Demand management, while crucial, must be supported by long-term augmentation solutions as described in Action 1.6. It is suggested that this must also be high on the list of priorities for early action.

Where there has been good collaboration on the development of the Strategy, the momentum *must* be maintained.

As the CNSWJO has advocated consistently, the success of these Strategies relies on their enablement through a Governance and Implementation Plan co-designed with Local Government to deliver on the options identified. Without this these place-based Strategies risk not delivering on the outcomes needed and, at worst, becoming shelf ware.

The CNSWJO thanks the Department for hearing our message and recognising it under Priority 1 – *Secure Water Supplies for Growing Regional Cities and Towns*, Action 1.2 as described below.

Action 1.2 - Establish a governance framework to coordinate actions under Priority 1

Establish a governance framework and arrangements in consultation with local councils and local water utilities to support coordination of actions under this priority and improve timely decision-making during extreme events.

While we welcome this action, the CNSWJO advocates that the governance framework and arrangements to coordinate actions needs to extend beyond just priority 1 to cover the delivery of the whole Strategy. It is only through this level of coordination that a fully integrated, whole of catchment approach to water management can be achieved. We need to move beyond the silos of the past and recognise that stakeholders need to work together to achieve the balance needed in water use in a new climate future.

As the managers of town water supplies for the Central NSW region, our members obviously see *reducing water supply risks for regional cities, towns and villages* as the highest priority, followed closely by *supporting a growing regional economy in a future of potentially reduced water availability.*

However, Councils as the champions and representatives of their communities also have an interest in ensuring that options that *address barriers to Aboriginal water rights* and that seek to *maintain and improve the health and resilience of the region's aquatic and floodplain ecosystems* are actioned.

The DNA of Local Government is Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) which considers all priorities for Councils including for industry, the environment, health and well-being of its community inclusive of its Aboriginal community. While the regulatory role of IP&R is not well recognised by state agencies, there is a real opportunity that has been identified through the Town Water Risk Reduction Program for better engagement with Councils to deliver on its community's priorities for all water uses.

Where water for critical human need *must* be the highest priority in times of shortages, there needs to be a forum for ongoing communication and decision making enabled within the region about 'doing more with less' and achieving the balance that is needed for all stakeholders' areas of interest across the catchment. This includes the Aboriginal community, irrigators and industry and the environment. It is in our communities' interests to ensure that the right balance is struck in water management across all these areas with a new approach to the coordination and decision-making around the delivery of options in the Strategy.

Council representatives who attended the focus session in Dubbo reported of a productive discussion with the DPE staff and stakeholders from across the catchment. Comments included that it was good to understand the issues for stakeholders in the lower Macquarie catchment where clearly all stakeholders have an interest in ensuring the 'health' of the catchment as a whole to enable the balance needed in water management. This is a view supported by the Federal Productivity Commission.

As has been evident through the collaboration with Local Government in the development of the Regional Water Strategies and through the Town Water Risk Reduction Program, much can be achieved by established forums of stakeholders represented at the appropriate level and supported by good governance. Relationships built through good and regular communication and mutual trust can support and enable decision making informed by local knowledge in times of crisis ensuring the right outcomes.

In the Lachlan catchment, the CNSWJO works closely with the Lachlan Valley Water Association through an established communique and regular meetings. While at times our views may differ, most of the time we agree and support each other's positions. Our interests are not conflicting, to the contrary Councils are committed to supporting and enabling their agricultural sector as the economic heart of our region while conversely our farmers don't want to see their towns run out of water. The relationship is mutually beneficial.

The same applies to industry, the health of the environment and our Aboriginal communities. Strong, resilient communities need water for all these uses and need to be able to negotiate how the balance is struck in times of critical shortage. Building these relationships with, for example, Environmental Water Advisory Groups and industry groups now will be beneficial to all stakeholders, particularly in times of critical shortage.

It is noted that the proposed action 1.2 would, *in consultation with local councils and local water utilities in the Macquarie Castlereagh region, establish a governance framework to support the actions under this priority of the Macquarie–Castlereagh Regional Water Strategy. It would consider council and local water utility capacity and capability to contribute to governance framework and take responsibility for actions. The aim of this action is to support the drought resilience of local councils by improving coordination of water management actions and planning processes that support town water security across different levels of government. This could build off existing governance structures already set up in the region.*

Based on the above commentary the CNSWJO is of the view that the governance framework should provide for a forum (Committee or Group?) to facilitate a 'whole of government' integrated strategic planning approach to ensure sustainable water management for the Macquarie catchment now and into the future inclusive of all areas of water use.

Representation should include local/regional subject matter experts and local/regional/state water professionals to address the complex relationships for sustainable water management as a multi-disciplinary team that looks at building community resilience from many perspectives. The aim being to deliver the actions identified in the Strategy and water resource management during extreme events.

As the CNSWJO has advocated previously, what is needed is a committee or the like with representatives at a suitable level (i.e. Regional Manager/Director).

Representation could include from:

- DPE – Water (various divisions)
- CNSWJO – representing its members in the Upper Macquarie
- Water Infrastructure NSW
- Water NSW
- Natural Resources Access Regulator
- NSW Health
- NSW EPA
- Regional NSW
- Central Tablelands Water
- Local Water Utilities – (not necessarily all Councils but potentially subject matter experts)
- Industry
- Environmental Water Advisory Groups
- Aboriginal Water Groups

In Central NSW, a Strategic Regional Transport Group is chaired by Cr Ken Keith, Mayor of Parkes and includes representation from Transport for NSW, RDA Central West, DPIE Regional, NSW/ACT Roads, Infrastructure Investment Division and the Department of Infrastructure - Inland Rail Division. It provides a good model that could be used for strategic regional water management.

Our vision is that this forum will oversee and coordinate the implementation of the Strategies and drive preparedness for future extreme events.

The forum's role would be to:

- Assist in the development of an implementation plan for Strategies
- Oversee and coordinate the implementation of the Strategies
- Provide accountability for the delivery of the Strategies
- Be kept informed of general progress and participate in delivery of priority actions
- Monitor and track the progress of implementing the Strategies
- Where impediments are identified, collaborate for resolution
- Provide a forum to discuss and resolve implementation issues or action delivery in a changing regional policy environment
- Provide high level progress updates to key stakeholders
- Inform the preparation of the Annual Monitoring Report

- Identify strategic regional projects that contribute to water resilience and climate change adaptation, given identified future water scarcity predictions
- Inform and participate in the three to four-year review of the Strategies (referred to on page 11)
- Provide recommendations for incorporation into the regional water strategies development, implementation and review process
- Improve regional preparedness by developing strategic regional contingency plans (i.e. Plan B & Plan C) that can be enacted during extreme events
- Develop strategic regional drought response emergency projects to the point of ready to implement so that minimal time is required for delivery should they be necessary
- Guide, assist and support regional participation (pilot projects) in the development of new initiatives being progressed under the Town Water Risk Reduction Program

Its outputs would be to:

- Identify and delegate actions with timeframes
- Deliver actions and present progress, results, outputs
- Communicate across all levels of government on the direction, alignment and tasks achieved
- Action plan for building regional water resilience, with actions flowing
 - from the Lachlan and Macquarie regional water strategies
 - to or from local water utility strategies
 - to or from the Regional Town Water Strategy.

The forum could be supported by outcome specific groups that bring together appropriate personnel to provide advice on specific issues or projects such as reviews of the Water Sharing Plans, the DPE Water Efficiency Program and work on the Groundwater Strategy.

It could be that sub-groups for the Upper and Lower Macquarie catchments are formed that meet separately but come together annually to discuss whole of catchment issues.

There are numerous governance structures that can be put in place and existing groups to manage concerns regarding the size of this forum. Again, this is something that really needs to be discussed with the key stakeholders in the region through a co-design exercise.

It is important that the forum is supported by a secretariat and guided by Terms of Reference developed collectively by the group. Strong governance including meeting dates set at the first meeting of the year, agendas including supporting material circulated a week prior to the meetings and minutes highlighting actions and responsibilities for achieving these distributed within a week of the meeting would be essential to ensure this forum delivers on its objectives and is transparent and accountable.

The CNSWJO notes advice in the Consultation Paper (page 109) as follows:

After public consultation, we will develop an implementation plan that sets out when we will commence each action, and what we will achieve by when. The implementation plan will also identify key partners for delivering these actions, including local councils, government agencies, local community and industry groups and local Aboriginal communities. Not all actions will commence at once. The availability of funding and the progress of existing government commitments will be a key consideration in planning when and how the actions will be implemented. The regional water strategies will be a key tool in securing funding as future opportunities arise.

Given the implementation plan will identify local councils, local community and industry groups and local Aboriginal communities as key partners to delivering these actions, the CNSWJO Board restates its long-held advocacy position that this implementation plan must be co-designed preferably with these stakeholders. If the Regional Water Strategies are to be truly place-based they need to be enabled in the region through the co-design of the Implementation Plan to achieve the coordinated, fully integrated whole of catchment approach to water management that is needed.

In summary we reiterate that:

while action 1.2 is welcomed, the CNSWJO advocates that the governance framework and arrangements to coordinate actions needs to extend beyond just priority 1 to cover the delivery of the whole Strategy. It is only through this level of coordination that a fully integrated, whole of catchment approach to water management can be achieved. We need to move beyond the silos of the past and recognise that stakeholders need to work together to achieve the balance needed in water use in a new climate future.


Also, we highlight that on Page 8 of the Consultation Paper - in the snapshot – reference to the major water storages is missing the Orange Water Supply Storages – Suma Park Dam, Spring Creek Dam and Gosling Creek Dam.

The CNSWJO has decades of experience including in inter-governmental collaboration and is now tasked with inter-governmental collaboration under the Local Government Act. We would be pleased to work with the department to facilitate the co-design of the Governance and Implementation Plan for both the Macquarie and the Lachlan Regional Water Strategies.

Again, we thank our colleagues in the Department for the good level of engagement in the development of the Strategy. It sets a solid foundation for future collaboration.

If you require further information or clarification on comments, please do not hesitate to contact Jenny Bennett on 0428 690 935 or Meredith Macpherson on 0427 451 085.

Yours sincerely,



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OUR REGIONAL PRIORITIES

LEVERAGING OUR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS



DRIVING EFFICIENCIES AND EFFECTIVENESS
SAVING COUNCILS MONEY

BUILDING CAPACITY
ACROSS OUR COUNCILS

WORKING WELL WITH
OTHER PEAK AGENCIES

ADVOCATE FOR BETTER INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES IN HEALTH AND AGEING



TELECOMMUNICATIONS

REGIONAL TRANSPORT PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE PRIORITISATION



REGIONAL WATER SECURITY AND PRODUCTIVE WATER



SUSTAINABLE, SECURE AND AFFORDABLE ENERGY FUTURE



OTHER IDEAS?

