



18 June 2007

MEDIA RELEASE

The Water Debate in Australia – A Drought of Action; A Flood of Politics, Vested Interests and Nimbyism

Practical action to address Australia's water crisis is being blocked by Federal-State politics, dead-locked in competing claims and counter-claims by vested interests and stymied by NIMBYism, according to an independent analysis of the water debate in Australia from 1 January to 30 April.

The analysis concluded that the Australian public is likely to be confused by the current debate as it is presenting dire warnings of a chronic water shortage, but little by way of agreed practical solutions to deal with the problem.

Among a number of key findings, the research found that the majority of discussion about water aired in the media continues to be in relation to the problem, rather than solutions.

The analysis also found that media reporting and commentary was dominated by the policies, proposals and viewpoints of politicians and vested interests. "Numerous media reports on water feature State Premiers criticising the Federal Government and other States, advancing parochial interests, and passing blame. On the other side, the Federal Government is accused of seeking to usurp the power of the States and gain political advantage." The researchers commented that the report could well be titled 'The Politics of Water'.

Furthermore, it reported that all solutions presented were being deadlocked in claim and counter-claim. "While some media have devoted space and time to presenting the public with simply explained factual and scientific information on water usage, storage and management, the vast majority of debate and discussion is contradictory claims and counter-claims by various Federal and State politicians, environmentalists, farmers' groups

and other vested interests such as landholders affected by proposed dams or residents potentially affected by infrastructure projects.”

The analysis reported that “in the debate over the best option to better manage water, recycling is winning over desalination plants in terms of favourable comment and support. Building new dams runs a distant third, mired in most cases in local politics.

“However, all solutions presented, including recycling and desalination, are encountering considerable opposition and criticism. In many respects, the debate is log-jammed with near equal argument for and against most strategies,” the analysis found.

It criticised some politicians for deliberately playing up the ‘yuk factor’ in relation to recycling sewage for their own political advantage.

The analysis, undertaken by the research unit of Media Monitors, reviewed almost 82,000 news reports, features articles, columns, letters to the editor and radio and TV program segments discussing water between 1 January and 30 April 2007 and conducted in-depth content analysis on a sample of 1,200 media articles in national and major metropolitan newspapers. The analysis was undertaken independently by Media Monitors with no paying client or sponsor of the research.

Media discussion of water provided a total of 3.5 billion ‘Opportunities to See’, according to the Media Monitors study (the number of articles multiplied by the circulation of each media). “It is unlikely that any adult or child over the age of reason in Australia is unaware that there is a water crisis,” the research concluded.

“What is less clear, however, are the most effective solutions to address Australia’s water shortage,” it found. The analysis warned that there is very limited objective information and education for the public to make informed decisions.

Recommendations of the research study included the Federal Government funding a national public education campaign on practical measures to better manage and save water and for the Government to use the objective scientific resources of a body such as CSIRO to develop and review proposals.

The report warned that there is a danger that when the drought breaks and dams fill, many Australians will believe the water issue has been resolved, as much discussion has focussed on drought, a natural disaster, as the cause of drying dams and river systems rather than fundamental endemic and systemic problems requiring a cohesive and coordinated national water management strategy.

Further information:

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Media Monitors is Australia's leading media monitoring and media research firm. The company scans 17,000 press articles each 24 hours and monitors 2,000 radio and TV programs daily, supplying more than one million media clippings and transcripts per month to clients. Its media analysis is conducted using CARMA[®] (Computer Aided Research and Media Analysis), a leading international media content analysis system following its acquisition of CARMA Asia Pacific in 2006.