

Summary of Armidale and New England Water issues.

Background:

The Armidale New England area, amalgamated Guyra, Dumaresq and Guyra Councils into Armidale Regional Council (ARC) in 2000. ARC Local government area now includes just over one third of the north western area of Macleay Catchment, some 5,000 of the 14450 square km of catchment.

The population and general water demand has been relatively stable with Armidale residents confident that it would 'never run out of water' until recent events. The impact of the establishment of water consumptive major global intensive horticulture industries (Costas in 2010) at Guyra and Red Jewel Nursery strawberry plug plant nursery (in 2018) and Australian Natural Therapeutics Group- cannabis (in 2019) below Armidale - has been significant.

The 2018-20 drought put the urban communities, rural enterprises and these high water-consumption 'industries' under pressure for water. Malpas Dam recorded an historic low and the highest-level water restrictions were in force for many months. In 2021 SOMR was alerted to the pumping of water from bores and its trucking to Costas during the drought and carried out site inspections and consulted with several of those 'in-the-know' there. At the time of inspection these massive, up to 4ha, igloos had minimal, if any, water-saving or water/nutrient recycling measures in place.

ARC decided to carry out many drastic actions to assist these Intensive Horticulture industries, including: trucking and pumping large amounts of water mainly to cool the igloos, apparently 24/7, to new reservoirs established in Guyra.

Understandably; there was significant community concern about this and the agreements between Costas and ARC to supply water. It was reviewed in a report (commissioned by ARC) by Todd Hopwood, looking at the period 2019 to 2020 only. This report found no evidence of 'corruption' but raised many concerns about lack of 'due process' in the agreement to supply water and lack of 'consultation' with the ratepayer/community.

Current Issues:

ARC's aim is 'an aspirational target' of 4000 new jobs by 2040 and at least 1000 new jobs in the next 5 years. It aims to achieve this through 'attracting sustainable industries drawing on our future role as Australia's largest renewable energy community, and expanding opportunities for intensive horticultural enterprises.' Link: ([Council sets ambitious target](#))

To support the aspirational population increase and these activities, particularly the intensive horticulture industries, ARC has proposed a massive water security/supply strategy. The strategy involves:

- Purchase of the decommissioned Oaky River Dam, repair of the dam infrastructure and pipeline to Armidale Treatment works (a cost of \$120million, or an estimated \$22,000 per connection, with an additional \$100m if a new water treatment facility is required)
- Raising the Malpas Dam wall level by 6.5m which will double the dam's capacity from the 230km² catchment; the NSW Government allocated \$27m for construction in early 2022.

- Extension of water supplies to other 'regional' centres, including Uralla. - Which is not even in the Macleay catchment or Armidale Regional Council area!
- The inclusion of deep bores in the 'sustainable water yield', despite undertakings that they would be used only in the 'direst of circumstances.'
- These deep bores are part of the region's unique water system of upland wetlands and areas such as the 'Mother of Ducks Lagoon' area, which is a 'perched aquifer' with minimal recharge opportunities and already highly stressed. - A simple understanding of this can be found in Ian Reeve's Report of 2020 of 'Guyra Geology and Groundwater Link: <https://www.une.edu.au/staff-profiles/institute-for-rural-futures/ireeve> and in detail from (Refer: HYDROILEX Groundwater Geosciences, GROUNDWATER GEOLOGY ENVIRONMENTAL GEOTHERMAL REPORT: HYDROGEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION GUYRA -EMERGENCY TOWN WATER SUPPLY: ARC; REPORT NUMBER: HG.19.10.3NT, OCTOBER 2019) Link: https://www.armidaleregional.nsw.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/420/Guyra%20Hydrogeological%20Investigation_Hydroilex%20HG19.10.3NT.PDF.aspx
- ARC's support for intensive horticulture is already reported as having an adverse impact on affordable housing availability and increased stress on provision of services, amenity and social cohesion. The monitoring of intensive horticulture industries is an ongoing impost on nearby residents and, importantly, the community and river environment downstream.
- ARC has recently advised that they will not conduct a 'water demand' study until after "new water supplies are established and brought online." Surely one would have thought that "demand-side planning" would form the basis of 'How much water would be needed?' and then ARC could plan for that- rather than an ambit 'aspirational' proposal.

Conclusion:

SOMR's considered opinion on the upstream water issue is:

1. ARC's proposal is 'over-reaching' and ill-considered in its actions; and we are suspicious of proposals to support highly water consumptive Intensive Horticulture Industries in an area with a naturally low sustainable water supply. - *Wrong industry for low water resource area.*
2. There should be rational demand-side planning to determine the water needed with water-wise use, rather than an ambit aspirational maximum amount at huge cost.
3. ARC's policies will have a drastic adverse cost on the environment, socially and economically; impacting river flow and water quality throughout the Macleay catchment. Residents of ARC LGA will face large water rate increases and taxpayer increases and those downstream will face a depleted water supply.
4. Greatly increasing In-Stream water reserves in the upper Mapas and Oaky dam catchments (some 460km²) will significantly reduce the natural water flows, exacerbating impact, especially in 'dry times,' for those communities and environment down-stream.

It is urgent that the Upper and Lower Catchment Councils, State Government and Community formally liaise and coordinate fully, rationally and holistically on these proposals and their 'whole-of-catchment' implications.

Sadly, there seems to be resistance for ARC to effectively communicate with Kempsey Shire Council (and vice-versa) whose residents and environment would be mostly adversely affected by reduced water supply. This ARC proposed Strategy appears to be

proposing that water is deprived (some might call it stolen) from the currently reliant community and environment downstream for unsustainable large corporate benefit.

To SOMR, the proposed ARC Water Security Strategy defies all forms of 'Common Sense' logic; on cost, cost sharing, appropriate land uses and water supply/use reasons, impacting downstream communities and environments, and it should be challenged.

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