


Submission to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts
Inquiry into Auditor-General's report No. 3 of 2015
Restoration of the Lower Cotter Catchment

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As a Consultant to the Auditor General for this report I acknowledge that my investigation into the restoration and management of the Lower Cotter Catchment formed a component of the material used in the final report, and therefore I am not a disinterested party in the matter. My participation in the Auditor-General's report is recorded in the report, and my comments here are not incompatible with that Report, but an emphasis on the recommendations.

The report followed the terms of reference set out in the brief, and focussed on the implementation of the earlier Strategic Management Plan (2007). This was a comprehensive and effective management plan, and my activities on behalf of the Auditor-General were to investigate the implementation of this plan up to the current time.

The plan was drawn up following the 2003 bushfire which burnt out the majority of the catchment, resulting in extensive debris and sediment deposition in the drinking water reservoirs of the Cotter catchment. The resulting water was unusable for potable water supply. Fortunately for Canberra, water from the Googong Dam was available as an alternate supply.

With the construction of the enlarged Cotter dam on the lower catchment, costing about \$410 million dollars and holding some 25% of Canberra's drinking water, the need for effective catchment management is apparent. Investigation of the 2015 condition of the lower Cotter catchment

demonstrated that several areas within the implementation of the 2007 plan required attention, as reported by the Auditor General.

In the early part of the restoration of the catchment following the fires, significant funds were available to manage erosion, reconstruct the road system, facilitate replanting and control weed and pine wildling growth. ACTEW (Icon Water) contributed at least \$11 million and Parks, Conservation and Lands approximately \$14.5 million up to 2006-2007.

An executive-level group (LCC Management Group) comprising representatives from ACTEW (Icon water), EPA, Environment ACT (now EPD and TAMS) and ESA controlled the program of works under a Deed of Agreement which lapsed in October 2009. Since that time some effective work has been undertaken in the catchment for road maintenance by TAMS and through Greening Australia's planting program which extended to 2014, but major erosion control, pine wildling control and blackberry control have not been undertaken at adequate level since 2009.

The consequence is a degraded, eroding catchment with high wildfire risks and extensive weeds, resulting in a significant overall risk to the quality of the water for potable supply, as outlined in the report.

This lack of activity over the last 6 years had two causes, one was that there was no effective budget and the other that there was no effective executive level coordination across agencies.

The combination of little budget and little attention resulted in the degradation of the catchment as reported by the Auditor General.

The Auditor General's Report had three key recommendations which I wish to endorse

1. Review the management and coordination arrangements for the Lower Cotter Catchment
2. Develop a Lower Cotter Risk Plan
3. Remediate the sediment control structures in the Lower Cotter Catchment.

I highlight two further requirements, without which progress in remediation of the catchment will be ineffective

1. Provide an adequate budget to undertake the actions required and

2. Control pine wildling regrowth to reduce fire risk, in association with ESA undertaking controlled burning.

ESA commenced burning of the highest risk areas in 2015, which was a highly positive action for risk management. However much of the upper part of the catchment is infested by pines. These need progressive removal as they are a high fire risk, enhance weed invasion and suppress native plant recolonization. The best outcome for water quality and quantity in the lower Cotter catchment is native vegetation, which reduces erosion, enhances biodiversity and restores the natural environment.

Icon Water holds the licence for drinking water supply in the ACT, which includes quality standards based on the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines. To meet these guidelines source water protection is critical for economic and reliable management of supply. With the lower Cotter catchment now a major supply resource for the ACT and surrounding NSW, it is essential that there is funded, capable management. Whether this should be entirely in the hands of Icon Water, or under a formal Deed between the appropriate ACT agency and Icon Water, requires resolution for the benefit of the community.

The ACT and region community has supported the expenditure by Icon Water of over \$500 million on enhancing water resources, which they are repaying through water charges. They can reasonably expect that the responsible bodies will effectively maintain these resources.

3rd Feb. 2016