

From: Bird, Emily on behalf of Vassarotti, Rebecca
Sent: Tue, 23 Mar 2021 07:19:21 +0000
To: Rattenbury, Shane; Rutledge, Geoffrey; Walker, IanS
Cc: Ebsworth, Imogen; Georgeson, Matthew; Sutton, Paula; McGuire, Anna; EPSDD
DLO; Ponton, Ben
Subject: MEETING: Queanbeyan Landcare
Attachments: 21-08039 - Mtg Brief + Attachment A - Vassarotti - Queanbeyan Landcare.pdf,
letter act region catchment man.coordination group march 2021.version 3 final.docx

23/3 Hi all – please see the attached submission that Queanbeyan Landcare recently made to the Regional Catchment Management Coordination Group, further to information below EB .

22/3 Please see attached Brief. Note, Shane is no longer able to attend the meeting but Anna will be.
EB

Attending:

Personal information
Personal information

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Sent: Tuesday, 15 December 2020 4:07 PM

To: RATTENBURY <RATTENBURY@act.gov.au>; VASSAROTTI <VASSAROTTI@act.gov.au>

Personal information

[Redacted]

Subject: Queanbeyan palerang Regional Council workshop on funding of land management, serious invasive species

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the ACT Government. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognise the sender and know the content is safe.

Minister for the Environment
Minister for Water, Energy and Emission Reductions

I am writing on behalf of Queanbeyan Landcare Inc. For a number of years members have been concerned about the lack of resources made available to Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council (QPRC) to undertake the management of invasive species and undertake other responsibilities required under the NSW Bio Security legislation and catchment management for areas under Council control. We are more concerned now because of the warming climate and more erratic rainfall favouring invasive species such as the very flammable African Lovegrass , *Eragrostic curvula*) and because of the serious

ongoing threats to the unusual level of biodiversity, the productive rural landscapes and rural residential areas in a Council area almost twice the size of the ACT.

Council's Biosecurity and Natural Landscape unit has developed excellent systems of surveying, mapping, monitoring, enforcing and reporting, but resources do not allow any advance on the control of unwanted species and it is a challenge even to maintain the status quo. There are inadequate resources for catchment and water quality management. Biodiversity field staff are part time and funded out of ad hoc grants.

This situation is largely due to rate pegging and competing demands, typical for local government.

Landcare helped to convince QPRC to hold a workshop for Councillors and senior staff on Wednesday 9 December, to consider the current operational situation and the future forecast requirements and possible sources of funding for these responsibilities. Landcare contributed to the Workshop and notes summarizing our main concerns are attached. A Senior Officer from the ACT Government provided some welcome information on the ACT'S experience with African Lovegrass, one of the so called 'transformer' weeds.

The issue is of course is funding. Landcare has been urging Council to pursue with the ACT Government for some time now, to seek a share of the revenue from the long running Water Abstraction Charge on Canberra water bills, which was instituted to reflect the value of scarce water supplies and generating revenue of more than \$30 million each year. As QPRC Purchases water from the ACT Government, Queanbeyan residents contribute something like 10% of the total revenue from this source, ie something over \$3 million each year. As the Commissioner for the Environment expressed concerns in her report of 2019 (copy of Canberra Times article on this is attached), that all the WAC revenue continues to flow to Consolidated Revenue and there is difficulty in tracing how all this money is spent. Queanbeyan Landcare is proposing that QPRC claim perhaps 20% each year, amounting to about \$600,000. This could be negotiated to be gradually introduced over time up to this level. This level also reflects the ACT's major role in directly managing the Water Supply catchment.

We are writing in the hope that the ACT Government would look favourably towards such an approach that hopefully will be made by QPRC. This approach has been supported by Green members of Queanbeyan Landcare, including Personal information

Personal information

15 December 2020



ACT
Government

Environment, Planning and
Sustainable Development

MEETING BRIEF

UNCLASSIFIED

To: Minister for the Environment

Tracking No.: 21/08039

From: Executive Group Manager, Environment

Date of meeting: Thursday, 25 March 2021

Subject: Queanbeyan Landcare Group request for funding from revenue raised by the Water Abstraction Charge.

Critical Date: 25 March 2021

- DDG, Environment, Water and Emissions Reduction 17/03/21

Purpose of the meeting

Queanbeyan Landcare Group wishes to meet to discuss funding from revenue raised by the Water Abstraction Charge.

Recommendations

That you note the possible discussion topics for your meeting with Queanbeyan Landcare Group.

Noted / Please Discuss

Rebecca Vassarotti MLA/...../.....

Minister's Office Feedback

Signatory Name: Ian Walker

Phone: 6205 9027

Action Officer: Chris Glennon

Phone: 6205 9023

Purpose of the meeting:	To discuss the possibility of ACT Government Funding from revenue raised by the Water Abstraction Charge (WAC). Background information and speaking points are provided at Attachment A .
Attendees:	Bill Hall, Queanbeyan Landcare Chair Tom Baker, Publicity Officer
Directorate representative in attendance:	Mr Ian Walker Executive Group Manager, Environment, Water and Heritage, EPSDD
Day / date:	Thursday, 25 March 2021
Time:	9:45 AM-10:30 AM
Venue:	Minister's Office
Background:	You are not known to have previously met with the Queanbeyan Landcare Group. The government's policy on the WAC is that revenue is included in consolidated revenue and is not hypothecated for specific purposes. More detailed background and speaking points at Attachment A .
Discussion:	Queanbeyan Landcare Group appear to have had a workshop with Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council re actions required to improve catchment health in the Queanbeyan Local Government Area. The issues of concern appear to be systematic of most areas being biodiversity management, invasive plant and pest control and soil degradation. As a result of the workshop, the Landcare Group appears to have been encouraged to approach the ACT Government for funding from the WAC.
Consultation Internal:	Nil
Cross directorate:	The management of the WAC (although approved by the Minister for Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction) is within the portfolio of CMTEDD (Treasury). Treasury have provided input into Attachment A .
External:	Nil
Media implications:	There are no significant media implications with this meeting.

Items to be discussed

1.1 Topic

Queanbeyan Landcare Group access to funding from revenue raised by the Water Abstraction Charge (WAC).

Background.

- The WAC is imposed under section 107 of the Water Resources Act 2007 through a disallowable instrument (DI) signed annually by the Minister for Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction.
- The WAC is a pass-through charge that is collected from urban water users by Icon Water, and from non-urban users by ACCESS Canberra (the Environment Protection Authority), with revenue passed through to ACT Treasury. The WAC is not a levy or a tax.
- The WAC for urban water supply is currently (2020/2021) \$0.631 per kilolitre (\$/kL) of water abstracted and for surface water or groundwater not supplied through the urban water network, \$0.305/kL of water taken. These rates are indexed to increase by 3% per annum. The decision to index the WAC was made by the ACT Government as part of 2016/17 budget process.
- The WAC revenue collected in 2019/2020 was \$ 34.9 million.
- Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council (QPRC) are contributors to the WAC as they receive bulk water supply for use from Icon Water. Their contribution to the WAC is in the vicinity of \$4.32 M.
- The objective of the WAC is to reflect the true value of water and promote the economically efficient and sustainable use of a scarce resource.
- The WAC was put in place to cover costs incurred by the Government including the costs of urban and non-urban water supplies, water catchment management, environment protection of ACT streams and lakes, along with water policy development and administration. The value of the WAC also includes a component related to scarcity, as well as costs associated with the provision of environmental flows.
- The WAC has been a contentious issue with QPRC with its processors having previously sought legal opinion of the validity of the WAC.

Speaking Points

- The Water Abstraction Charge (WAC) is designed to ensure the price of water reflects its true value as a scarce resource, and to help assist in managing demand.
- WAC revenue is included in consolidated revenue and is not hypothecated for specific purposes.
- Requests for funding to undertake management and environmental protection activities related to the Territory's water catchments may be considered through the annual ACT Government Budget process.
- This approach ensures that all funding requests are considered in a consistent, transparent manner, and assessed with all requests for Government funding across a wide range of ACT community needs and priorities.
- The ACT has a history of supporting cross border catchment management by
 - Establishment of the ACT and Region Catchment Management Coordination Group.
 - Providing \$375 K for catchment groups for community engagement activities across the

- region including Molongolo Catchment Group.
- \$270 K for the operations of Waterwatch which includes sections of Cooma, Queanbeyan and Yass LGAs.
 - \$75 K for Frogwatch.
 - Resource sharing with South East Local Land Services and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service on invasive pest and animal response.
 - Queanbeyan Landcare Group should also be advised that the ACT NRM team are currently updating their NRM Plan and will be undertaking a Drought Resilient Planning process that the group may wish to contribute via the “your say” portal.
 - The ACT Government values the above mentioned programs and will strive to maintain this investment pending other government priorities.



Queanbeyan Landcare Inc. PO Box 848 Queanbeyan 2620

Maxine Cooper
Chairperson
ACT and Region Catchment Management Coordination Group
c/- Environment and Planning Directorate
GPO Box 158 CANBERRA ACT 2601

I am writing on behalf of the members of Queanbeyan Landcare Inc in relation to funding for managing natural landscapes and catchment management within the Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council (QPRC) and the future direction of revenue generated through the Water Allocation Charge. The greatly enlarged QPRC Council area is endowed with a high level of biodiversity, agricultural resources and valued landscapes in an area twice the size of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

Over the last 2 years, Queanbeyan Landcare has approached QPRC in relation to seven concerns, set out in Attachment A, which threaten these values. These include, in summary:

- in spite of excellent mapping and inspection systems in place, there is an increasing burden keeping serious invasive species at bay, while climate change is exacerbating their spread.
- resources are not available to adequately implement and review existing natural areas management plans
- resources are not available to survey, develop, monitor and implement plans for many new natural areas now under Council's responsibilities, including managing managing wildfire risk.
- many excellent projects over the last 20 years have had little follow up and are failing because of a lack of resources. There is a need for a dedicated and well trained bushland and healthy waterways team and more ecologically trained staff.
- QPRC also requires resources to tap the huge potential community goodwill, hopefully to emulate the ACT Parkcare model for conservation volunteering.
- QPRC requires resources to undertake greater catchment and environmental monitoring and to develop and service a 'Nature Map' and
- QPRC requires greater capacity to work with other managers of public land in the QPRC Council area and coordinate with ACT systems.

Although there is a forthcoming review of the NSW local Government Rating System, local Government is very limited in raising additional funding due to rate pegging.

Council agreed to hold a full Workshop in December 2020 to discuss our major concerns. This included the management of the most invasive species across the Council region, and what

resources are available to catch up and deal with the spread of these species and strategies to deal with the increasing impact of climate change. In February 2021, we met with the QPRC CEO, Peter Tegart and Mayor Tim Overall. At this meeting we agree that more resources are required so that ecological resources and systems and the water catchments do not continue to deteriorate.

Water Abstraction Charge: Queanbeyan Landcare Inc has been urging Council to approach the ACT Government, to seek a fair share of the revenue from the long running Water Abstraction Charge (WAC) on Canberra water bills, which was instituted in 1999 to reflect the value of scarce water supplies and the cost of caring for our water supply catchments, including the impact of changes to the catchment environment. As such, the WAC is supposed to provide a (visible) signal to the community about the extent of environmental and other costs of water extraction. The WAC generates revenue of \$30-35 million each year, growing as population increases. As QPRC Purchases water from the ACT Government, Queanbeyan residents contribute 9% of the total revenue from this source, approaching \$3 million each year.

Queanbeyan Landcare Inc is proposing that QPRC claim something like 25% each year, amounting to about \$750,000. This could be negotiated to be introduced gradually over a period to this level. This percentage also reflects the ACT's major role in managing the 'primary' water supply catchment of the Cotter system.

- We have also urged that Council offer to match this at least dollar for dollar from its own resources and to report in full on total annual expenditure.

Rationale: The rationale for QPRC in accessing a fair share of the WAC revenue starts with the Seat of Government Acceptance Act 1909, establishing the National Capital, and which cedes the waters of the Queanbeyan and Molonglo Rivers and Jerrabomberra Creek to the Commonwealth. NSW accepted and still accepts the responsibility of protecting these water supply catchments, aside from the Googong Dam foreshores. While the primary water catchment for Canberra and Queanbeyan is in the Cotter Catchment, many water users rely on the Molonglo-Queanbeyan River system, including recreational users and irrigation from Lake Burley Griffin and downstream to the Murray Darling Basin. Googong dam is our reserve water supply.

We note that the 2018-2019 Annual Report of the ACT and Region Catchment Management Coordination Group recognizes that Local government *"undertakes a wide range of activities related to catchment management including.landuse planning, managing public land and regulating private properties"*.

On the same basis, there is an argument for also directing WAC Revenue through the Regional Catchment Management Group infrastructure that has been developed over the last 20 years in the Sub-Region. This has been urged by the 'Heroic and the Damned' report of the Review of the lower Cotter Catchment Restoration, Recommendation 2.1. (2018).

Members of Queanbeyan Landcare Inc and others in our community consider that all the WAC revenue should be specifically directed to the management of our landscapes and catchments and reported on annually. This could be supplemented as needed with

substantial revenue from ICON dividends (profits) which we understand also flow to ACT Consolidated Revenue.

We argue that what proportion flows to QPRC should be controlled by Council and dedicated to supporting a permanent and certain management structure, to avoid the ad hoc, stop-start project funding scenarios which have bedeviled 'landcare' for decades.

Accountability for Expenditure of WAC: Our members are concerned about the apparent lack of accountability, transparency and reporting of WAC revenue. As the Commissioner for the Environment expressed concerns in a Canberra Times report of March 2019 (**copy attached**), all the WAC revenue continues to flow to Consolidated Revenue and there is difficulty in tracing how all this money is spent. This came out of 'Heroic and the Damned', the Review of the lower Cotter Catchment Restoration, 2018. The recommendation contained in the Commissioner's Annual report for 2019-2020 was not accepted by the ACT Government. This same opinion has been expressed by the ACT Independent Competition and Regulatory Commission, which maintains that "to be effective, these (catchment costs) need to be borne directly and transparently by those who use the resource" (Issues Paper July 2003). Most importantly, transparency and accountability for such environmental levies are required under the National Water Reform Framework 1994 and COAG agreements, supporting the ongoing National Water Policy Reform process.

Queanbeyan Landcare Inc members ask that in the event of QPRC making an approach to the ACT Government to negotiate a fair share of the WAC Revenue, your committee support this approach. We also ask your Committee to consider the issue of accountability and transparency for the expenditure of all the Abstraction Charge and also the dividend revenue from ICON Water.

The ACT sub region has an extremely complex water and catchment jurisdictional situation but it comes down to achieving the best management of the flows, quality and security of water resources of the Murray Darling Basin system. This will rely upon cross border cooperation and ensuring that the correct messages are going to the community.

Bill Hall
Chairperson
19 March 2021

ATTACHMENT A.

Queanbeyan Landcare Submission (Notes) to Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council Workshop, Funding for Natural Landscapes Services for Environmental management: Wednesday 9 dec 2020

This is a good opportunity for Councillors to hear more about how Council's Natural Landscapes Services team of 3 inspectors, 2 weed operators, team leaders and part time Biodiversity officer implement their system of surveying, mapping, monitoring, prioritizing, taking necessary action and reporting, across an area twice as large as the ACT.

This system is guided by Council's M. Plan objectives and a very good understanding of the daunting NSW Biosecurity legislation, to address the wide range of invasive species and level of each type of infestation, in order to protect priority environment and economic assets. The aim is to try to keep each category of at current levels, and to keep currently clean areas clean.

Watch the videos they have produced by the staff of the NLS Unit.

Alas this is a challenge and really a compromise and any progress across the categories requires more person power.

This is of concern to members of the community and Queanbeyan landcare, for a number of reasons.

The first is that QPRC has an unusually large range of ecosystems (woodlands, grasslands, forest, wetlands, heathlands and riverine plains) set in regionally significant corridors as well as huge rural residential estates and farmland. **So we have a lot to lose in terms of degradation. The good news** is that many of these areas are still relatively clean of infestations, so far.

The second is the advent of serious invasive plants such as our Case Study today, African lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*). This weed has invaded much of temperate part so the world and has as we have seen, taken over much of the ACT. AL is very flammable as we saw with the dangerous Piallago fires.

This leads to the third concern, with a warming climate and more erratic rainfall, such weeds as *Eragrostis c.* have the strong advantage to spread and dominate, leading to greater challenge to all land managers, including the increasing wildfire threat.

The forth concern is that Council's NLS is poised to help prepare management plans for at least 150 land units, to protect environmental assets, including threatened species and systems, and on top of revising the management plans for iconic assets such as Mt Jerrabomberra. Council is also having to prepare and manage its Biosecurity Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy. It is not at all clear where resources are going to come from for these processes.

The fifth concern is the partial reliance on contracting and securing grants for Biodiversity and conservation staff and spray contractors, when this is administratively onerous and

more uncertain. What is needed is permanent, well trained, dedicated Natural Areas management team.

The sixth point: The community's concerns partly arise from repeated cases of lack of follow up work to many projects in Queanbeyan, eg re-invasion by weeds of the Queanbeyan River Corridor (blackberry/, ivy, honeysuckle, ash, privets); the 2019 National Tree Day planting almost destroyed by weeds, huge recent planting on the Queanbeyan river near the old Cemetery with no follow up maintenance. Lack of resources

Therefore there is an urgent need to bolstered community education and liaison to tap into the huge level of goodwill of the community and Landcare, resources that can become a strong ally - already groups such as Queanbeyan Landcare Inc which plays a critical role in managing Bicentennial Park, Mt Jerrabomberra, Buttles Creek, and elsewhere.

- There is an argument that our small landcare movement needs more strategic direction to grow and concentrate on priority areas only and this probably can only come from Council staff who are the eyes and ears across the Council area – ultimately to have something similar to the **world class, flourishing Parkcare network in the ACT.**

Seven: There is also a need to direct more resources to **catchment management and Environmental health**, part of the NLS mandate, including water quality monitoring across the shire.

Also, better equipment technology, eg air powered mower cleaners.

Funding: The obvious question is where funding could come from. This will be addressed at end of workshop.

(extract from note to 2 ACT Green Ministers: Water Abstraction Charge: Landcare has been urging Council to pursue with the ACT Government for some time now, to seek a share of the revenue from the long running Water Abstraction Charge on Canberra water bills, which was instituted to reflect the value of scarce water supplies and generating revenue of at least \$30 million each year. As QPRC Purchases water from the ACT Government, Queanbeyan residents contribute something like 10% of the total revenue from this source, ie something like \$3 million each year. As the Commissioner for the Environment expressed concerns in her report of 2019 (copy attached), that all the WAC revenue continues to flow to Consolidated Revenue and there is difficulty in tracing how all this money is spent. Queanbeyan Landcare is proposing that QPRC claim perhaps 25% each year, amounting to about \$750,000. This could be negotiated to be gradually introduced over time up to this level. This level also reflects the ACT 's major role in managing the Water Supply catchment.)

- Natural Landscapes Service (24)
- Objective: *'Sustain the natural qualities of topography, vegetation and waterways to support the environmental and economic functioning of bio-connections and landscapes and minimise risk through natural hazards'*

Biodiversity (24.1)

Catchment (24.2)

Biosecurity (24.3) and Environmental Health (24.4)

ATTACHMENT B.

‘Water surcharge worth \$30 million a year not spent on water projects’

- **Finbar O'Mallon Canberra Times (7 March 2019)**

Latest News

The ACT Environment Commissioner's office said it was unable to trace spending of a surcharge on Canberrans water bills meant to reflect the value of the capital's scarce water supplies.

The government said it had collected nearly \$60 million from this charge for consolidated revenue in the last two financial years, but had only spent \$15.6 million in 2016 -17 on water projects.

ACT Environment Commissioner Kate Auty has recommended the government sets the water abstraction charge specifically for water projects to protect Canberra's drinking water. Photo: Jamila Toderas

In her recent report, *The Heroic and the Dammed*, commissioner Kate Auty and her co-authors Caitlin Roy and Kirilly Dickson, said this money should be only spent on water projects in the ACT.

ADVERTISING

Icon Water, the ACT government owned water utility, collects the Water Abstraction Charge from every Canberran.

While not specifically slated for water infrastructure projects, the environments directorate website said the charge "[reflects the value of a scarce natural resource vested in the ACT government](#)".

In 2012-13, the government said the charge "covers the cost" of undertaking works to manage water resources, collecting data on water supplies around Canberra and developing management policies on the capital's water supply.

The 2017-18 budget predicted the charge to raise more than \$92 million in government revenue over the next three financial years.

The report pointed to the critical risks facing Canberra's Lower Cotter Catchment - the source of the majority of the city's drinking water - including a lack of funding and management framework around the Cotter.

It suggests the more than \$90 million in revenue from the charge be spent on catchment management, environmental protection and water policy and planning.

"While [the catchment is] there and people are enjoying it and there's no fires and the water is alright, everybody thinks we don't need to do anything," Professor Auty said.

Currently the charge is set at 0.60 cents per kilolitre, with Canberrans using an average of 150 kilolitres per year.

A spokeswoman for Chief Minister Andrew Barr, who is also the capital's Treasurer, said the charge was not hypothecated - legally set - to be spent on specific expenditures.

"However, a number of projects relating to preserving and managing the ACT's water supply are funded from consolidated revenue through the normal budget process," Mr Barr's spokeswoman said.

Mr Barr's spokeswoman said the government's \$15.8 million spent on water management activities in 2016-17, but this was just more than half of the revenue raised from the charge that financial year.

"This included significant investment in the creation of wetlands to improve water quality in the ACT, downstream in the Murrumbidgee River system and in the wider Murray-Darling Basin," Mr Barr's spokeswoman said.

The spokeswoman said the government reports spending on water planning and management projects to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission as required by the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

"Based on our research and consultation with key stakeholders we believe all of these responses to be correct, in essence," Ms Roy said.

The Environment Commissioner's report said the government's report to the consumer commission "purports that the majority of revenue raised for water planning and management activities in the ACT is sourced from the [water abstraction charge]".

But Professor Auty's attempts to correlate water related spending with revenue raised from the charged showed "the amount collected significantly exceeds the amount spent".

"For as long as [charge] revenue is allocated to consolidated revenue, there will be no direct correlation between the amount received and the amount spent," Ms Roy said.

"This does not reflect the true value of water as a scarce resource."

The Environment Commissioner's report also recommended the government introduce a centralised monitoring group for the Cotter catchment, the charge to be the source of long-term funding for Canberra's water projects and laws introduced to have abandoned cars removed quickly and to ban cars from some sections of the catchment.