



Hunter Water Corporation
ABN 46 228 513 446

PO Box 5171
HRMC NSW 2310
36 Honeysuckle Drive
NEWCASTLE NSW 2300
1300 657 657 (T)
(02) 4979 9625 (F)
enquiries@hunterwater.com.au
hunterwater.com.au

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Jim Bentley Opinion Piece

DUNGOG CONNECTIONS TO THE CTGM

For the past two years, Hunter Water has been working with the owners of 71 properties, which are directly connected to the Chichester Trunk Gravity Main (CTGM) north of the Dungog Water Treatment Plant. Hunter Water has offered to provide a rainwater tank or an onsite treatment option at its own cost to ensure they have a safe drinking water solution. These customers draw raw untreated water from the pipeline which is not suitable for drinking.

Untreated water is not safe for human consumption under the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines, because it can carry pathogens such as bacteria, cryptosporidium and giardia that can be harmful to human health. The current guidelines were updated in 2011 by the Commonwealth Government's National Health and Medical Research Council. As recently as last month, we had a detection of giardia in the raw untreated water at the Chichester Dam outlet. While the detection did not pose any risk to our treated drinking water, it demonstrated that there is a clear and evident health risk if untreated water is consumed.

I acknowledge that Hunter Water has not always handled this long-running issue well, and I apologise for that. Our focus now is on doing everything we can to provide a suitable solution for each customer. We understand that some customers do not believe that drinking raw untreated water could pose a risk to their health, which is why we are working to address this public health risk. We simply cannot let the situation continue due to the health imperative.

Rainwater tanks and onsite treatment solutions are common for rural and remote properties that cannot feasibly be connected to the reticulated network, including in Hunter Water's area of operations. Hunter Water is funding, project managing and delivering a solution for each customer's needs, which is beyond our Operating Licence requirements and has an estimated value of \$30,000 per property, on average. Nineteen properties now have an alternate drinking water supply in place and we are committed to working with the remaining customers on progressing a solution.

We have been listening to our customers and are working to address their concerns. I attended two meetings with the CTGM Water Users Community Group in November 2016 and June 2017 and a public meeting in August 2017 where all were welcome. Prior to these meetings Hunter Water was only considering a rainwater tank solution, but after listening to customers' feedback, we agreed to provide an onsite treatment option where it is feasible to do so. For customers who select a rainwater tank, we will arrange for it to be filled at Hunter Water's cost.

In the spirit of working together, we continue to engage with customers regarding the non-standard CTGM water users agreement. As some customers expressed concerns around the wording of the agreement, we have offered to cover reasonable costs, where requested, so that they can access independent legal advice.

Yesterday I met with some of the property owners and their legal representative to discuss their concerns and find a way to move forward. Hunter Water has heard their concerns, particularly around the maintenance costs for customers who are pursuing an onsite treatment option, and have offered to reimburse them for \$1,000 of their maintenance costs per annum for a period of five years.

Additionally, we have clarified that providing an alternative drinking water solution does not mean they will lose access to their current connection to the CTGM. Hunter Water intends to continue to supply untreated water for non-potable purposes such as irrigation, farming, toilets and washing machines, providing that customers give written acknowledgement, via the agreement, that they will not use the water for drinking purposes.

Hunter Water is wholeheartedly committed to working with our customers north of Dungog to deliver a solution that meets their needs.

JIM BENTLEY
Managing Director, Hunter Water