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

5 July 2018

Jim Bentley Opinion Piece

WHY WE SHOULD LOVE WATER TOGETHER

After a dry summer, which saw our dams fall to their lowest levels in a decade, autumn failed to deliver the rainfall we had hoped for. The start of winter however brought some welcome relief, with decent rainfall providing a boost to our dams. While we now find ourselves in a slightly better position compared to a few weeks ago with our total storage around 84%, the need to conserve our precious resource remains just as important. In order for us to truly value water and ensure meaningful change in the future, we need to make a lasting change to our water use, not just in response to conditions or circumstances.

While we can't control the weather, as a community we can control our water consumption, and work together to explore all options to improve water security with the best outcomes for water bill payers and the environment. Reducing our usage now will mean that if the rest of the winter is dry, we will start summer with storage levels in a reasonable position. If we can keep our usage low this will allow us time to embrace new technologies and deliver other innovative solutions, hopefully reducing the need to build large scale, expensive new infrastructure.

At Hunter Water we recognise that we can do more to save water. Last year we surveyed more than half of our 5,000 kilometre network, finding and fixing hundreds of leaks, with the remaining half to be completed by the end of this year. We are fortunate that members of our community are very vigilant and typically report well over a hundred leaks per week, and fixing these has become the highest priority for our maintenance teams.

It is important for Hunter Water to do all it can to learn with our communities about ways to save our precious resource and promote a more sustainable future. On average, Hunter households use 172 thousand litres of water each year, which is 10 percent higher than best practice in places like Victoria and South Eastern Queensland. Rather than telling people how they can or can't use water, our *Love Water* campaign aims to encourage the community to value water and to take action to be more water wise. One action we are encouraging customers to take is to visit the water use calculator on our website to understand savings which they could make. So far this calendar year more than 50,000 people have accessed this facility.

This is an important time in our water planning. The population in our region is expected to increase by nearly 120,000 over the next 20 years. At this rate of growth, and with current usage patterns, total demand is expected to surpass what we can supply by 2036. Rather than simply building large scale, expensive infrastructure, we think it is important for us to learn together as a community about the water future we want, and how we could bring this about.

By working together to reduce demand, and therefore extending the time between now and when we would need to make decisions regarding the next water source, we will have the opportunity to consider future technologies that would help us save more water, and maybe

delay the need for a new water source indefinitely. The value of this would be lower water bills now and in the future, greater investment in innovation and technology, and a more sustainable water future.

Keeping our options open on the long term water future of the Hunter doesn't mean we are taking risks with water security for the region. As has been widely reported, Hunter Water is currently in the process of obtaining planning approvals for a temporary desalination plant at Belmont. This was one of Hunter Water's obligations under the whole-of-Government Lower Hunter Water Plan released in 2014. Reports that it would cost $1 billion are grossly inaccurate. We will be developing cost estimates as part of the concept design, which is standard practice for this type of project. However, it will be at considerably less cost than other more permanent options and presents as the most viable emergency water source option to help prolong supplies during a severe drought.

If we build this plant it will not address the long term supply and demand shortfall I referred to earlier in the article. The purpose of carrying out the planning for the temporary desalination plant at Belmont is to be an insurance policy in the event of a drought. We would only build it if, despite our best efforts to be more efficient, water storage levels fall unacceptably low. It would only provide enough water to help us get through a drought, when water would be severely restricted, and this is only a small portion of what the region would need under normal conditions.

If we can learn to Love Water together, I believe the Hunter will be in the best possible position to make a decision on its water future, and ensure it is sustainable, efficient and viable for generations to come. In the meantime we need to plan for severe drought and be ready to respond in case we need to build the temporary desalination plant. I hope we don't need to build the plant, but we need to be ready in case severe drought requires this action. While we need to have the plans ready to go in case we need to build the plant, the best thing we can do together is reduce water demand, reducing the likelihood of needing this plant, and any large scale additional water supply infrastructure, to support a more sustainable future with reduced energy consumption and better water flows in the environment.

My thanks to all in our community for the steps they are making to value water more, whether by reducing their own consumption or by helping us to reduce our losses. Together we can do it.

JIM BENTLEY
Hunter Water Managing Director