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NSW pillage groundwater reserves

Inland Rivers Network is aghast at moves by the NSW Government to issue brand new access licences for groundwater throughout the state, when current access is mismanaged.

The NSW State Water Strategy, released last August, promised that the Government will develop and implement a NSW Groundwater Strategy and Action Plan to improve groundwater management across NSW. This must be done as soon as possible, and before more access licences for groundwater sources are issued.

Groundwater is too often subject to contamination and over extraction. Issuing brand new entitlements is stealing from the future, instead of fixing the problems we face now. A collapsed aquifer is water storage lost forever.

Severe droughts experienced since the turn of the millennium have seen dependence on groundwater increase sharply, leading to significant drawdown of some groundwater reserves.

“When the rivers start running low the response is to turn to groundwater, rather than deal with the huge problem of over-allocation and water mismanagement.

We need to look at ways we can take less water from the environment, like water recycling and more efficient irrigation,” said Bev Smiles, President of Inland Rivers Network.

Most groundwater bores aren't required to have meters, and the rollout of compulsory metering for large bores is more of a stroll out. Even though the measurement of groundwater use is woefully inaccurate, significant levels of water theft are still detectable.

Extraction from groundwater sources in the Macquarie and Murrumbidgee valleys was found to be more than 20% over the legal limits in the 2018/2019 year, yet the excessive take was excused by the Murray Darling Basin Authority.¹

One-tenth of groundwater users were found to be taking more groundwater than their licence allows in a pilot program run by the Natural Resources Access Regulator this year and the largest fine NRAR can issue is a paltry \$1,500.

¹ Reference MDBA audit

“If we have legal limits, they should mean something. The law must be applied, and the penalties for stealing water should be high enough to be a deterrent.” said Ms Smiles.

“Groundwater is not a magic pudding we can turn to after we’ve sucked our rivers dry. We can always print more money but we can’t print water.”

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