

Views on Irrigation Policy in Australia

Overview

Water policy in Australia is undergoing considerable and unprecedented change. Most recently, the emphasis on the sustainable management of water resources in the Murray Darling Basin has seen a shift of control from the States to the Commonwealth. The declining availability of water and the subsequent approaches taken by governments, have come under increasing scrutiny from the public. Indeed, the actions associated with water policy in Australia, particularly water used for irrigated agriculture, have seen 'lively' political debates causing fragmentation within communities. The successful implementation of a policy is dependant on public support, especially water policy, and so we need to rethink how we 'make' policy in Australia if we are to successfully manage our water resources into the future.

If successful and equitable policy outcomes are to be achieved, current policy processes in Australia will need to be revised to include participation of a variety of stakeholders.

The 2008 NPSI/IAL Travel Fellow toured Brazil and China to examine two diverse approaches to policy development, implementation and practice. The study of these countries experiences offer valuable insights for Australian policy processes. Before visiting these countries a survey of Australian irrigation stakeholders was undertaken to identify topics of focus for the study.

This research update discusses some of the key findings of the study and suggestions for improving policy development for irrigation in Australia.



Meeting at a tea house in Beijing with Ministry of water resources delegates (left) and translator (front right) who are involved with the development of irrigation policy at the federal level.

Policy and the Community

This study attempted to gain an insight into a number of issues surrounding recent irrigation policy. The survey of irrigation stakeholders found that:

- The majority of respondents have 'some understanding' of how irrigation policy is made in Australia
- Almost all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *'high levels of participation will lead to more equitable outcomes'*
- 'Some' or 'a little' involvement from a range of stakeholders is perceived to be currently occurring in irrigation policy
- Irrigated agriculture is perceived to be valued by regional communities, but not by the general Australian public
- A variety of ideas exist in relation to the appropriate level of government for irrigation decision making

One of the most important outcomes of the survey was the overwhelming responses, both in quantity and quality, in relation to suggested improvements for the future of Australian irrigation policy. This helped to highlight further gaps and directions for the future development of irrigation policy.

Using the survey outcomes as themes for examining irrigation policy and implementation in two contrasting countries provided a point of reference so that effective comparisons could be made to aspects of Australian policy development and implementation. The tour of China provided an understanding of how irrigation policy was developed between the Federal and the Provincial Governments. Also of interest was China's experimentation with Water User Associations, as it demonstrates a unique model of participation and water allocation.

In Brazil, a number of irrigation districts were visited that demonstrated the local and participatory management of water. In addition, the way in which rivers are classified as under either state or federal control may have relevance to Australia in light of the recent shifts of control in the Murray Darling Basin.

Messages for policy makers

The findings from the survey highlight a number of key focal points for decision makers. Two points of particular importance to the irrigation community are:

- Meaningful and accessible participation in decision making
- Promoting the value of irrigated agriculture to the general Australian public

This study also highlights the divergent views of the irrigation community regarding irrigation policy in Australia. Areas of public concern, such as irrigation policy, that are characterised by complexity and uncertainty require alternative policy processes to what currently exist. Embracing and actively negotiating divergent views becomes increasingly important when considering broader goals of sustainability and successful compliance with policy aims.

Examining water policy development and management in China and Brazil provided insights into:

- how different levels of government can interact in policy development
- community participation in water management

Examining the real-life application of different policy approaches can be a tool to developing a policy process for Australia that is equitable and inclusive of irrigation needs.

For more Information

Visit the NPSI website at www.npsi.gov.au or Irrigation Australia Limited website at www.irrigation.org.au

CONTACT THE 2008 TRAVEL FELLOW:

- **Kimberley Graham**
Kimberley.Graham@wspgroup.com
Ph: (03) 9412 5117

About the Travel Fellowship

The NPSI /IAL Fellowship Award enables young professionals within the irrigation industry the opportunity to travel overseas to undertake research and gain experience and knowledge. The Travel Fellowship is a joint funded by the National Program for Sustainable Irrigation and Irrigation Australia Limited.

