

## Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (NSW)

### Inside:

Bob Carr's Legacy	1
Sustainable Agriculture	2
Goulburn Case Study	3
Desalination Plant For Kurnell	4

### Bob Carr – An Environmental Legacy?

On his departure from state politics at the end of July, Bob Carr listed among his proudest achievements his government's environmental policies. In particular, he referred to more national parks as "a gift to generations yet unborn". Environmental commentators are divided in their analysis of the impact of Bob Carr's leadership. While there is praise for the increase in the number of national parks – they now occupy 8% of NSW land – concerns have been raised about the government's commitment to maintaining these parks. While funding for national parks did increase under Carr's leadership, they are still woefully under funded. In 2003, the Institute of Public Affairs estimated that NSW had only one ranger for every 22,700 hectares of park. Failure to manage parks can mean increased risks of bushfires. Weeds and pest animals left alone in parks can spread to adjacent farmland, making it almost unusable.

Carr made some important changes in water management – most notably, the BASIX scheme which requires all new houses to reduce water use by 40%, and water tank rebates. Both initiatives encourage consideration of environmental sustainability. However, these achievements have been outweighed by the Carr Government's failure to seriously address demand management in the state. The government's response to the continuing drought and resulting water shortages has been to focus on *increasing water supply*, rather than managing demand for existing supplies. Plans like the proposed desalination plant at Kurnell (see p2) are evidence of a shortsighted and unsustainable approach to the state's environmental problems.

A failing public transport system is also forcing more people in Sydney to rely on cars to get around – another loss for the environment.

Bob Carr's environmental aspirations should not be criticised. Rather, his policy failures should be seen as a lesson that approaches to the environment need to be holistic and focus on long term sustainability.

## Agricultural Sustainability

Australia's ongoing water shortages raise questions about the sustainability of Australian farming practices. Should Australian farmers be farming crops like rice and cotton that require high water consumption?

Consider these approximate figures from the CSIRO

To produce one kilogram of oven dry wheat grain, it takes 715 – 750 litres of water

For 1 kg maize, 540 – 630 litres

For 1 kg soybeans, 1650 – 2200 litres

For 1 kg paddy rice, 1550 litres

For 1 kg beef, 50,000 – 100,000 litres

For 1 kg clean wool, 170,000 litres

Rice farming, for example, uses a large amount of water. It is important to question *why* Australia engages in rice farming when it appears that our climate is so unsuited to the practice.

In a recent article, academic Troy Duncan argued that:

“We now know that Australia is the driest, flattest, most infertile, climatically most unpredictable and biologically most impoverished populated continent on Earth. Australian soils contain approximately half the level of nitrates and phosphates to equivalent soils found anywhere else. Unfortunately our forefathers weren't aware of this and the continent's size created an illusion which saw comparisons with the US and population predictions of 500 million, popular. This caused a blind assault upon Australia's natural resources and has left a lasting and devastating legacy for the land and its inhabitants.

...

Our British forefathers did not create a society here. Instead, they imported all elements of their society from outside Australia and we have since failed to survive anywhere near the level of coexistence to that once achieved by Aborigines. Unfortunately though, it would take a brave farmer to ditch his wheat crop and start producing wattle seed. It's not just up to the farmers. **It's time to realise that each and every one of us has a part to play in our environmental crisis. In order to lessen the destructive effects of recurring drought, salinity and El Nino and adapt to our unique environment, we must change our predominantly European attitudes and take advantage of our native produce.**”

[full article “Are you what you eat – Australian?” available on [www.onlineopinion.com.au](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au)]

Duncan raises the prospect of Australia relying more on its native products. While perhaps a complete abandonment of ‘traditional’ crops is unrealistic, this article provides some sense of the attitudinal shift required if Australia is to continue to produce in a sustainable fashion

## What's Happening Around Australia?

### Case Study: GOULBURN

Goulburn has suffered from a lack of rainfall all the way through the end of 2004, and the beginning of 2005. Despite some rainfall in July 2005, Goulburn is now so dry that water is only predicted to last for another 8 months. The experience of the people of Goulburn is a microcosm of what is expected to happen all around the country.



#### Effects of the Shortages

Shortages are impacting the social and economic life of the town.

- The local pool has closed. Competitive swimmers now have to travel almost an hour to Canberra to train
- Sports fields are too hard to play on, and trees in local parks are in danger.
- Industry in the town has already cut water usage by 30%. The two biggest industries in the town, an abattoir and a wool scouring plant, are constrained by export standards. If they can't maintain production, they may have to close and deprive the community of jobs and associated income.
- Moisture levels in soil are so low that it will take 2 years *after* the drought breaks to replenish grasses and pastures

#### An Isolated Example?

Water Shortages like those that Goulburn is experiencing are unlikely to be isolated incidences. Climate change means that the continent is getting hotter and drier. For example, the CSIRO has predicted that increased temperatures in Victoria could cause a 35% reduction to the amount of water flowing to the city's reservoirs by 2050. [*Implications of Potential Climate Change for Melbourne's Water Resources, CSIRO*]

#### The Good News!

The Goulburn Mulwaree council has applied to the Federal Government for funds for a treatment plant that will recycle the town's water for general re-use.

The City of Toowoomba announced similar plans in July 2005. If the \$68 million dollar plan goes ahead, 5000 million litres of water will be purified and piped to the city's residents.

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## Desalination Plant for Kurnell

The April edition of *Watermark* discussed a number of options to address Sydney's overuse of water. In July this year Bob Carr announced that if the drought continues into 2006, construction will start on a desalination plant in the Southern Sydney suburb of Kurnell.

The decision was made to put the plant at Kurnell with no community consultation. Kurnell is already the site of an oil refinery and extensive sand mining, as well as being one of Sydney's suburbs that receives the heaviest effects of aircraft noise and movement. The plant will cause significant disturbance and environmental degradation in the area. However, the normal planning controls won't apply to the plant, because the State Government has designated it "critical infrastructure".

The environmental implications of the plant for all of Sydney have been well documented. Bob Carr has himself referred to water from desalination plants as "bottled electricity" because of its excessive energy requirements. Critics have pointed out that desalination should be an option of last resort. *Sydney needs to make a commitment to adopting demand management and recycling strategies seriously.* At the moment, Sydney recycles only 3% of its water. In comparison, Adelaide recycles 19%, and Melbourne and Perth are working towards meeting a goal of 20% recycled in 2010.

**TAKE ACTION!** – the new premier has indicated that he plans to build this desalination plant whether or not the drought continues.

Write to Morris Iemma, Utilities Minister Carl Scully, and Planning Minister Frank Sartor and make them aware of your opinions on the plant, and on the NSW Government's approaches to water management.

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