



URALLA IS TALKING ABOUT WATER!

ZNET in partnership with Uralla Shire Council and Global Water Institute are facilitating a community discussion on how we can best achieve water security. The first step is to become informed. This week's topic is why it's important to consider community values when we make decisions about water sustainability and security.

Fresh water is a limited resource and its use is hotly contested in parts of Australia like the Murray Darling Basin. Uralla sits at the top of the Basin catchment and we have never had to really consider sharing our water, and since the dam wall was raised in the 1960s, we have had enough to go around. But that is no longer the case - change is needed. There is increasing recognition that bottom up and inclusive decision making is key to making good choices on water policy and strategy for the future.



WHY ARE COMMUNITY VALUES IMPORTANT?



What is community engagement?

The term community engagement captures a broad range of practices and initiatives through which the general public and other stakeholders are invited to participate in and contribute to significant policy, planning and decision-making. Public participation has a long history, and the principles of community engagement were captured in the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development which said that 'environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level' and spoke of the need for citizens to have 'access to information concerning the environment ... and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes'.

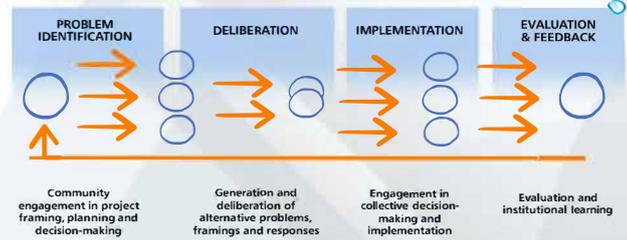
The involvement of members of the public in policy-making – particularly in areas where we are directly affected – is commonly regarded as a hallmark of sustainable development. This has flowed right through to local government where community consultation is identified as a key input to decision making, so it is really good that Uralla Shire Council is taking an active role in this Let's Talk About Water initiative.

Ways of doing community consultation

Early ways of doing consultation were based on what is called a "uni-directional decision-making processes" – often referred to as the 'Decide, Announce, Defend' model. This does not always work well – it was the model used to "consult" with the community in Toowoomba on recycled water and failed badly when public and stakeholder concerns were not acknowledged up front. The outcome was that Toowoomba ended up with more expensive water as one of the best technical solutions was "off the table". Ironically, the solution implemented (piping water up the Range from Wivenhoe Dam) will result in Toowoomba residents drinking recycled water as Western Corridor Water Recycling Scheme comes on stream.



The preferred model now is a “multi-directional” approach whereby community members are able to consider and evaluate the future demands on water resources before technical solutions are offered by their water authority. This brings the community along in the decision making so all options for water security are on the table. A great example is how the Lower Hunter Water Plan was developed with the community.



For the multi-directional model to work there needs to be a shared understanding of:

- community values, views and concerns for the technical options for water security
- how these values and concerns shape people’s understanding of each option
- how the community is likely to respond
- and importantly what key information the community would like to know before a solution is rolled out.

Community engagement builds public discussion and consideration of the need for alternative water sources and develops better understanding of community values and responses that are likely to be important as we move forward.

Join the conversation

Come and “engage”! Your insights, questions and feedback are important and this is your chance to Have Your Say. To find out when Focus Groups and Workshops are scheduled go to zneturalla.org.au/water and register your interest, or have a chat with our Water Project Officer: 0474 297 790, water@zneturalla.org.au

Resources

A useful report here is Water Recycling and the Public: Guidelines for Community Engagement by Matthew Kearnes and Judy Motion available at <http://vuir.vu.edu.au/32223/>

A recent example of the way community engagement methods were used in the Lower Hunter is also available at www.hunterwater.com.au/our-water/water-supply/water-in-the-lower-hunter/lower-hunter-water-plan