

Government Direction Statement on Wheatbelt Drainage

February 2007

Salinity management is complex and may require the implementation of a number of management options within a single catchment or farm. Any management option must be assessed in the context of overall catchment water management giving consideration to surface water management, enhanced evapotranspiration, water conservation and drainage.

Drains, up to three metres deep, are one option for managing salinity. Farm-scale drainage in Wheatbelt areas has been practiced for at least two decades. However, large scale, arterial drainage is a relatively new activity. While some are enthusiastic about arterial drainage there are also many who are either opposed or ambivalent towards the concept. All groups in the drainage debate recognise the need for a Government endorsed and supported framework to enable a responsible and accountable approach to the planning, implementation and management of drainage in the context of catchment water management.

Statement of Government position

The Government acknowledges appropriate drainage and other engineering options as important elements of the 'toolbox' to manage salinity. Salinity management requires a combination of tools, including engineering options and a range of vegetation options, such as salt-tolerant pastures, perennial pastures, and tree crops.

The State Government will continue to work with the regional groups, farmers and catchment groups to improve the way drainage and other engineering options are implemented and managed. Engineering options need to be sustainable and not lead to environmental problems downstream. Some of the issues related to wheatbelt drainage include a lack of a management framework, lack of legislation to specifically manage arterial drainage issues, funding of drainage schemes, landholder conflict and downstream impacts.

There needs to be an accepted approval process for large scale drainage projects to ensure the problem is not just passed on or made worse.

To ensure appropriate arterial drainage the Government is committed to:

- Establishing a Wheatbelt Drainage Council to ensure wheatbelt drainage is based on sound science, appropriate standards, and meets environmental objectives.
- Assessing and finding solutions to downstream impacts of drainage implementation.
- Facilitating the development of water management plans.
- Reviewing legislation associated with wheatbelt drainage.

Establishment of a Wheatbelt Drainage Council

For the Wheatbelt area, the Government has established a Wheatbelt Drainage Council (WDC) to provide strategic, planning, governance and implementation advice on drainage as part of water-cycle management.

The WDC will provide advice directly to the Minister for Water Resources on drainage planning, implementation and management.

The Council will:

- Within the first 6 months provide to the Minister for Water Resources clear principles upon which drainage scheme proposals can be assessed;
- During the first 12 months develop an appropriate policy framework for inland drainage for consideration by the Minister for Water Resources;
- Provide ongoing advice on policy development to the Minister for Water Resources on inland drainage;
- Provide advice to the Minister for Water Resources on how to streamline and integrate the assessment process across government authorities;
- Evaluate approaches to wheatbelt drainage governance and management and provide recommendations to the Minister for Water Resources.

A technical working group comprising of staff from the Department of Water, Department of Environment and Conservation and the Department of Agriculture and Food will provide technical advice to the Council.

Assessing and finding solutions to downstream impacts of drainage implementation

It is important that engineering options are sustainable and do not lead to environmental problems downstream. Hence this government is committed to assessing drainage management options through projects such as the engineering evaluation initiative.

The \$4 million Engineering Evaluation Initiative (EEI) managed by the Department of Water is evaluating deep drains at Morawa, Beacon, Pithara, and Dumbleyung. It is also assessing downstream impacts of drainage and groundwater pumping through a project that brings together Murdoch University, the Centre of Excellence in Natural Resource Management and CSIRO. These projects are funded from the National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality to which this Government matched the \$158 million contribution from the Commonwealth.

Facilitating the Development of Water Management Plans

Strategic water catchment planning includes consideration of the cumulative effects of drainage occurring over large parts of a river basin and the effect of salinity on water quality, biodiversity, and rural infrastructure under a range of drainage options. Integrating engineering options into water plans with the intention of achieving multiple benefits will require:

- Designing engineering to protect and potentially enhance biodiversity assets (such as the use of drainage lines as vegetation corridors);
- Designing engineering to try to exclude surface freshwater from saline groundwater (such as the use of dual deep drainage and surface water banks system);
- Consideration of natural water movement across landscapes; and
- Consideration of water treatment/desalination options.

In areas where there is strong stakeholder support for the development of water catchment management plans that include drainage, there is likely to be a need for a management group. The group could be either an existing natural resource management group or it could be specifically created for the task.

Reviewing legislation associated with wheatbelt drainage

The Government is undertaking a review of water legislation consisting of wide ranging legislative reform of water and water related Acts to modernise and consolidate water resource management and water services statutes. As a part of this process it is proposed the following drainage concepts be considered:

- Drainage planning for the State and the linkage of drainage planning with land use planning
- Clear identification of levels of drainage responsibilities in legislation (regulator, manager, service provider).
- Incorporation of quality outcomes. Currently legislation/licensing focuses on volume/quantity not the quality of the water and funding mechanisms for quality management in drainage planning and management would need to be considered.