



ALLIANCE OF WESTERN COUNCILS



28 March 2024

NSW Productivity Commission
52 Martin Place
Sydney NSW 2000
GPO Box 5469

My sincere thanks for the opportunity to submit on behalf of the Alliance of Western Councils (AWC).

The AWC represents the northwestern corner of NSW with its 13 Councils extending from Mudgee (Mid-Western) in the East to Wilcannia in the West and including Dubbo Regional, Gilgandra, Coonamble, Warrumbungle, Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke, Cobar Bogan , Warren and Narromine. We cover 32% of the state and serve 105,000 people. We cover that part of the state widely acknowledged as being the lowest socio-economic areas of NSW with the largest proportion of Indigenous residents and the worst health outcomes. Having good healthy water utilities in not just a privilege but a necessity.

Our current and worsening economic situation along with the tyranny of distance and an inability to get trained staff are the major limiting factors in ensuring the best water outcomes for our residents. On a user pay basis we are ill-equipped to maintain the utilities to a standard that meets the legislation particularly in the smaller and more remote locations across western NSW. We are subjected to the vagaries of weather and experience droughts and floods more often and more seriously than our closer neighbours.

Our major centres such as Mudgee and Dubbo are far better equipped to maintain and operate their utilities cost effectively and within budget. The further from the coast the harder to attract staff, the costlier the freight and the more difficult to operate without the collaboration of the other member councils. Despite all of these limiting factors we still prefer to operate our own facilities knowing that local operators will put more effort into maintenance, be available in faster timeframes and are the keepers of the technology and secrets of our facilities.

The Alliance of Western Councils comprises Bogan Shire, Bourke Shire, Brewarrina Shire, Central Darling Shire, Cobar Shire, Coonamble Shire, Gilgandra Shire, Narromine Shire, Walgett Shire, Warren Shire, Warrumbungle Shire Councils, Dubbo Regional Council and Mid-Western Regional Council.

The cost spiral of recent years and the necessary rise in wages for operators will put more fiscal pressure on our utilities and points to the fact that without government assistance our smaller communities will be placed in jeopardy from a health and well-being position. With much of the labour in these remote areas being of a casual nature the ability to pay higher rates for water becomes impossible and can render the towns unliveable, a situation we all find unacceptable and intolerable. This and the changing nature of health requirements for water quality make it even more difficult to comply.

The Eligible Risks and Issues list is typically bureaucratic and ignores the fact that many Shires within our Association will have multiple plants in towns of less than 2000 people, again many will be remote, disadvantaged communities who simply can't afford the cost of maintenance or infrastructure replacement. The lack of understanding and appreciation of the factors that determine outcomes in these rural and remote areas needs addressing as a matter of urgency and more autonomy needs to be delivered directly to the Shires of our Association. The ability to design and maintain these facilities should be the responsibility of the Shires with the Government taking on a more significant funding role. The involvement of tier 2 or 3 contractors is imperative and local knowledge vital.

Finally, the independence of Shires to operate with or without Government and or contractors is seen as vital in keeping costs to a minimum and delivering optimal outcomes. Training on country is an imperative as a significant proportion of our technicians are indigenous and will struggle with training off country. It is the local understanding again highlighting how things can work best in our communities.

Thank you again for this opportunity.

Yours sincerely

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Cr Craig Davies
Chair