

SNOWY RIVER – STILL NO FLOWS

Time for a Snowy River environmental audit

Twenty years ago the Bracks Labor Party took government in Victoria on a commitment to restore environmental flows to the beleaguered Snowy River, yet the river is still dry at key locations along its length. The river is suffering from headwaters to mouth.

In 1999 Independent MP Craig Ingram threw his support behind the incoming Labor Government dependent on a guarantee to return 28% of average annual natural flows to the Snowy River below Jindabyne Dam. This was the scientifically identified minimum environmental flow required to restore the river. The Snowy had 99% of its headwaters diverted west to the Murray-Darling Basin since Jindabyne Dam was constructed in 1967.

In 2002 the three government shareholders of Snowy Hydro Ltd agreed to return up to 28% of average annual natural flow to the Snowy below Jindabyne.

In early May, we witnessed Parks Victoria contractors excavating the sand clogged entrance to the ocean at Marlo caused by ongoing low river flows. It remains to be seen whether the continued low flows will be sufficient to maintain the entrance open for long.

“This is not simply due to the drought”, said Louise Crisp, secretary Gippsland Environment Group.

“Last water year 2018-19 the Snowy River environmental allocation from Jindabyne Dam was only 13% mean annual natural flow. This water year 2019-20, beginning May 1, it is only approximately 10%.

Despite almost half a billion dollars spent on water savings in the Murray Darling Basin to offset increased flows to the Snowy River, why is the river still in serious trouble?

Firstly the intergovernmental agreements to restore the Snowy did not simply involve releasing more water down the river. Instead the Victorian and NSW Governments funded a joint government authority ‘Water for Rivers’ to acquire water savings in the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Murray-Goulburn systems to offset any increased flows to the Snowy. However the governments only funded the return of 21% average natural flow by 2012, whilst agreeing to negotiate to return up to 28% post-2012. Seven years later the final 7% has still not been funded.

Secondly almost half the volume of water savings entitlements acquired by ‘Water for Rivers’ is paper water i.e. low reliability or general security entitlements that only deliver a decent allocation to the river in very wet years. It’s unlikely therefore that the Snowy will ever receive more than an average of 15% flow over the longer term.

Thirdly, even though the Snowy catchment alone contributes more than 1000 gigalitres/yr to the Murray Darling Basin, the Snowy Scheme was excluded from the Basin Plan in 2012. As a result sustainable diversion limits have never been identified for the Snowy River.



Gungarlin River in upper Snowy catchment

There are still rivers and creeks in the upper Snowy catchment in Kosciusko National Park that have been dry for 50 years (see photo above: *Gungarlin River in upper Snowy catchment*). The Eucumbene River, once known as the east branch of the Snowy, was also not included in the Snowy environmental flows agreements.

Increased flows scheduled under the Snowy Water Licence (2002) to two sections of the upper Snowy River have still not been delivered at the designated volumes.

The Snowy River itself is completely truncated at Guthega Dam and Island Bend Dam above Jindabyne in Kosciusko National Park (see photos below: *Snowy River at Guthega Dam; Snowy River below Island Bend Dam*).



Above: *Snowy River at Guthega Dam*



Left: *Snowy River below Island Bend Dam*

“Climate change is exacerbating the problems of the Snowy River”, said Ms Crisp “but despite two reviews of the Snowy Water Licence in the past ten years there has been no environmental assessment of the impact of climate change on Snowy River flows, nor any review of the adequacy of the volume of environmental flows. The Snowy River Benchmarking and Monitoring Program was disbanded in 2012. The independent Snowy Scientific Committee was not reappointed after its first three year term expired in May 2011. The NSW Government replaced it with a government controlled community advisory group in 2018 which does not have the capacity to undertake any scientific research.”

“The Commonwealth Government now owns 100% of Snowy Hydro Ltd. It’s time for an independent review of the parlous environmental condition of the Snowy River.”

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