



Australian Government



Inspector-
General of
Water
Compliance

WATER'S EDGE: TRANSCRIPT

S3, Episode 3: Hear from the community Agquip 2023

Speaker: *Water's Edge* podcast acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout the Murray-Darling Basin and Australia, and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and community. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to the elders past, present and emerging.

Annabelle Hudson: Well, for this episode of Waters Edge we're coming to you from Ag Quip, Gunnada, where we've heard from hundreds of people over three days about issues in the basin affecting them.

Speaker 2: Welcome to Water's Edge.

AH: The Inspector General Troy Grant was here and he was able to speak to people directly about their concerns. Here's a bit of what you in the community had to say.

Man #1: We're talking about a Murray-Darling Basin and water and the fact that, being an ex-western division person, water is the most important part of life out there. Without water you just cannot survive. That goes not just for the rivers, but it goes for underground water too. So, I'm reluctant to support people that are irrigating crops with underground water, but, as far as the Murray-Darling goes, it should never have been left to the states to look after and administer it. It should have been looked after, right from the word go, by the Commonwealth as one person. So, it's a balancing act, but there should be enough information between all the states and the Feds and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission to be able to work out what the flows are going to be within the river systems now. And the allocations need to be adjusted to those flows that are there - not what's held in the dams. Adjusted to what's in the flow. They know what is entering the system. They've got gauging stations all the way along the rivers. They know what's coming - or they should know! - and they need to let take advice from people that are lived on the rivers for a long, long, long time.

Troy Grant: You're passionate about the system. You know a tonne about it, from what you've just said there, and you're frustrated that the states run it because they won't defer their powers to have it run singly, by the federal department in a single entity. You said you've heard of us, but that you didn't understand what we do. So, we've been created as an independent body to police everyone responsible for that water management. What's your views on that? Do you think that's a good thing? Like an independent umpire, an independent arbitrator - while we can't manage the river ourselves, we're an independent body that makes them all accountable, and we're transparent and put out information to the public. Is that something, you think, that is a good thing?

Man #1: I think it is a good thing - as long as the regulator looks at it in a broad view.

Man #2: I'm interested to know how you're going to get co-operation with all this water management? You've got different states. You've got New South Wales, Victoria, you've got South Australia and Queensland. How do you make all those governments co-operate to manage water better? That's what I'd like to know. And I know the government's had inquiries and it goes on and on - but nothing concrete comes out. I respect the issues, but I'd like to know: how can they make it work?

TG: Mate, you're the star of the show. Because we were established two years ago to fix that. We're the Inspector General for Water Compliance in the Murray Darling Basin and we police the Australian government - which is the Water Division, the MDBA, the Commonwealth Environmental World of Holder, and then every state's jurisdiction. When we started up, we got a bloke called Des Pearson did an audit, basically. He looked at how they all managed it individually, and then what was required to do exactly what you're talk about - how to get them together.

Man #2: Yes.

TG: So, one of the recommendations he made was to create something called the Regulatory Leaders Forum, that I chair. So, I'm independent, and I bring them all together, and we get them - because there's all different components: the metering component, the enforcement component, how many inspections they do, what sort of penalty they hand out, decisions about water releases.

Man #2: Legislation?

TG: At state and federal - it's both. That's part of the problem. It's so confusing. People get confused. Ironically, what people don't understand is, before I started that meeting, in the ten years that the Murray-Darling Basin plan has been alive, they'd never met before. That's why they've never worked together. But since then, we've produced a couple of things that they put in together. So, you can see whether they're doing their job properly. One of them is called the Metering Report card. By 2025, they've all got to reach a certain coverage of meters, a quality of meters, and the information that comes from the meters in the reporting.

Man #2: Is that legislated?

TG: It's part of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. It's called the Compliance Pact. It's a legislative document.

Man #2: You've got to have - unfortunately! - a hammer to hit 'em on the head with, to make them comply. Otherwise it's a toothless tiger. Who was that other fella you had?

TG: Mick Kelty.

Man #2: What'd he do? He had no power to really do anything.

TG: I replaced Mick Kelty, and then they gave me the powers. You're making the points, 100% right. Mick didn't have the powers. So, on the fifth of August, two years ago, the powers came in. So, we're two years old and it takes time to recruit

people. So, we're just starting to hit our straps. The Metering Report card is out, to get the states working together, and by the end of the year we'll have a compliance reporting framework. So, you'll be able to read off our website exactly what every state is going and trying to do it more similar, together, and right across the Basin.

Man #2: Well, I'll watch with great interest and I wish you all the best.

AH: Also joining the Inspector-General here were two of our field officers. Gundawindi-based officer Jess said the three days were really helpful and an important way for her to speak to some people she may have never met before. Jess what are some of the issues that people have been talking to you about the last few days?

Jess: We've had a quite a few stakeholders drop in and talk to us about trouble with getting compliant with their meters - accessing a duly qualified person to install meters, or repair meters, particularly in that sort of Namoi-Guaido New South Wales area of the Northern Basin. Some other issues are that we're having lots of stakeholders coming in and talking to us about how they're finding it very challenging to access information from state agencies like New South Wales Water, particularly around licensing. How do they get licensing? How do they apply for it? How do they check if they've done the right thing with processing paperwork? Most people are using the online tool, but again they're looking for feedback around whether they've done that process correctly or not, and are unable to do that. So, we've had to refer quite a few back to New South Wales Water and also to NRAR [?] around those licensing and compliance issues.

AH: And then where are you sort of seeing people coming from? Are they mostly from New South Wales?

Jess: Yeah, lots of people from New South Wales. People from Gunnedah, Narrabri, Moree. We've had a few from the Lachlan area, down near Dubbo. Some from Corrindi, and the Tamworth region. So, yes, very heavily New South Wales-based with the stakeholders we've been speaking to over the last two days.

AH: And now that we're nearly wrapped up with day three, what will you do with all this information that you've gathered after talking to people?

Jess: The first process with collating this information we will have a meeting with our Assistant Director who compiles all of the intelligence into a report. We'll go through a detailed debrief of what the key themes were, what the key messages from stakeholders were. From that report, that information will be delivered directly to the executive. Usually, there will be a number of field reports that sort of go along with that as well as follow-up engagements. The Inspector General has been here for two days as well, so he'll probably have some value to add to that. And that information, eventually, in 12 months' time when we've compiled the field days that we've set out to do this year - all of that information - that will go towards supporting decision-making around future work planning.

AH: So, people can rest assured knowing that the information they've shared with you will actually be put into something meaningful?

Jess: Yeah, absolutely. Every bit of information that we get from stakeholders is uploaded onto a log in real time. So, I might be speaking with a stakeholder. I'll take their details. I'll either make an arrangement to have an engagement with them maybe in a week or two's time or whenever that availability works. Then, that data is put into a spreadsheet and I will send that directly to another team member, via email, and she will log that to the log. So, we don't have any lag with recording this data. Often, if people have asked - quite a few people have come in and said, 'Oh, we don't have a contact for this person, or we're not really sure about how to get this across the line or what agency this is with'. Maybe it doesn't fall exactly in our remit, but we have the information. You just take their email, punch out an email, and send that directly to them. So, everything is recorded and everything goes towards adding value to future work that we do.

AH: AgQuip [?] is the second field day the IGWC has attended this year with some more on the calendar soon. Maggie is in charge of organising the IGWC's presence at field days. Maggie, can you tell us what goes into organising something like AgQuip?

Maggie: We get together with the field offices and chat over the biggest issues that are going to be relevant to the area and we get some collateral together, a little bit of marketing giveaways, for people.

AH: So, what field days have we been to now? And have we got any more planned coming up?

Maggie: So, earlier this month we were in Mali, at the Mali Machinery Field days. That was our first one for the year. It was a great local event that brought in a lot of irrigators and dry land farmers. So, there was a lot of good engagements that came from that one. Obviously we're at AgQuip at the moment in Gunnedah and again there a lot of irrigators here, a lot of people from town as well. So, it's always interesting to get people's different perspectives on the water issues. Next up, we have Riverland, in South Australia, and then shortly after that we've got Henty Machinery Field Days.

AH: And what about next year? Are you already looking at planning events for next year?

Maggie: We sure are. I imagine we'll be back at a couple of these field days but we're also looking into some of the bigger shows in the bigger areas, as well as some of the more local grassroots events and shows in some of the smaller communities as well.

AH: So, people can expect to see more of the Inspector General of Water Compliance?

Maggie: They certainly can.

AH: It was the 50th anniversary of AgQuip and, after a couple of years of it being delayed, it was good to see it back and bigger than ever before. The Inspector General was at the official opening, congratulating everyone on their mammoth efforts.

- TG: It's a wonderful pleasure and privilege for us to be here as a supporter of the 50th AgQuip. On a personal note, I've been coming to AgQuip since I was seven years old, back in 1977, and to be able to contribute to this wonderful celebration, of fifty years as a sponsor and supporter of this event as the Inspector General for Water Compliance for the Murray Darling Basin is a wonderful opportunity that we're very appreciative of. So, I'd like to extend my congratulations to the organisers from 50 years ago - Max Ellis on my left over here, who's a wonderful legend of this event and this region as well. This is such an important event for us to be able to engage with the community, to tell us what we need to be doing to hold those government agencies to account, to make sure that water management across the Basin is fair and equitable, is being managed on a level playing field, and transparency and accountability about the spending of taxpayers' money - some \$13 billion of it - has been done for the right reasons in the right way. The scope of people that come from across the Basin is enormous. I've been really pleasantly surprised to learn through our site how many people are coming from the mid-North Coast, through the Hunter, into this area. So, it's always been a wonderful draw card. It gets wonderful people together to see the very best on offer in the agricultural sector and to have those conversations and showcase what we do and make us available to everyone that we engage with and rely on to do our job. So, on behalf of us, congratulations to the AgQuip team. Well done. I'm very proud to be a supporting sponsor this year, and have a wonderful AgQuip everyone. Thank you.
- AH: Well, now we're preparing for Riverland and Henty Field Days later in the month. We look forward to seeing you there. Our field officers will be at the Riverland Field Days on the 15th and 16th of September. Visit us at site 236, on the corner of Central Boulevard and Second Street. And say g'day. For those visiting the Henty Machinery Field Days, over the 19th, 20th and 21st of September, make sure you call in and see us at Site 708 Block P. It'll be great to have a chat and hear from you.