



Australian Government



Inspector-
General of
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Compliance

WATER'S EDGE: TRANSCRIPT

S3, Episode 4: 'How the community feels about water management in the Basin'

Speaker 1: *Water's Edge* Podcast acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout the Murray Darling Basin and Australia, and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and community.

AH: Coming up. We find out how the community feels about water management in the Murray Darling Basin.

BL: Sometimes, when people get information from word-of-mouth, it may be that some of those myths or misperceptions are being replicated. And that can make it tricky for us, when we're trying to get people to listen to government as a source of information or ourselves, in particular.

AH: And, what the research is telling us about Basin knowledge.

RM: One of the interesting things that I've found was that of those who have heard of the Basin, or who identify as living in it, and know they live in it, only 6% were able to identify all of the states that are in the Basin.

AH: I'm your host, Annabel Hudson.

Speaker 1: This is *Water's Edge*. And welcome to the conversation.

AH: 77% of the general population doesn't know whether they live in the Murray-Darling Basin. That's despite it being the country's largest area of agricultural production, the food bowl producing a third of Australia's food supply. This is just one of the stats that we found interesting in our first community sentiment survey, a tool used by the Inspector-General to get a sense from the community about issues affecting the Basin. But how can we know what issues people are frustrated by, when the majority of the community doesn't even know they live in the Basin? Well, for today's episode of *Water's Edge*, we're joined by Deputy Inspector-General Bridget Leopold, and Assistant Director of Intelligence and Engagement, Rachael Macnamara, to find out more about this important survey. Firstly, welcome to *Water's Edge*, it's both of your first time on the show. How are you feeling?

BL: Thanks, Annabelle. Feeling good.

RM: Thanks, Annabelle.

AH: We'll start with you, Bridget. You're one of two Deputy Inspector-Generals, with the Inspector-General of Water Compliance. What's your role at the IGWC?

BL: Thanks, Annabelle. My role is Deputy Inspector-General of capability. That includes a number of functions particularly focused around governance, internal governance and

best practice processes in that space. We also look after the intergovernmental relations component, which does tie into some of this survey data, and is quite interesting. Finally, I also have the Media and Engagement team within my remit, which does both public engagements but also supports the office with their publications and media products such as yourself!

AH: So, you're the side of the shop that, if people are out and about at field days, where we've been recently, you're in charge of all that side of things - the public-facing side of engagement?

BL: Yes. That's correct. The side of the office that focuses on that engagement piece, both with the public but also with the governments that we work with quite closely, as well.

AH: And Rachael, you're fairly new to the IGWC. Are you finding your feet very quickly? You've been thrown in the deep end with the AREMA [?] research. What exactly do you do as the Assistant Director of Intelligence and Engagement?

RM: Thanks, Annabelle. It's a bit of a long name there, isn't it? I'm really lucky to have 5 field officers in my team. So, we are spread far and wide across the Murray-Darling Basin. We have offices in Gundawindy, Mildura, Loxton, Dubbo, and Albury. I work out of the Albury office. I'm really lucky to have one of the field officers there with me. So, they are the cornerstone of the boots-on-the-ground, eyes-and-ears of the IGWC for engagement. So, they are out there, speaking to the community, speaking to other government agencies as well, and finding out what is going on and bringing that information back to us. We are collating that information, reviewing that, and using that for our evidence base.

AH: And how have things evolved with the field officer network and the engagement side of things? You've started a few months ago, but it looks very different now to how it was when you first came on board, Bridget.

BL: That's correct. So, in the early stages, as a brand new entity, we were focused on making sure people knew who the Inspector-General for Water Compliance was and the functions that we had, so that people knew relevant issues that they could refer to us or contact us about. Since that time, since the early stages, we've realised that the information we're gathering does require a level of analysis and interpretation, so that we can identify themes and feed that up for decision-making for what we might need to do about those issues. So, bringing Rachael on-board has seen Rachael use her background in policing and intelligence to bring structure around the analysis of the data we're receiving, which we collate quarterly through a number of means, do further research onto that, and provide some evidence and recommendations about what we might do.

RM: Yeah, that pretty much encompasses my role, which is a new role in the IGWC. It's a next phase that the IGWC is moving into, and we will be moving forward with that and extra capabilities within that and our team and what we can do in moving forward, into the next phase.

AH: Today, we're going to be talking about the annual community sentiments survey, which for our listeners is basically a survey of people who live in the Murray-Darling Basin, asking them a series of questions about water management, compliance, and perceptions about everything water-related. The Inspector-General then uses that information to

build up a database of sorts to help him gain a deeper understanding of the issues and the areas he should be focussing on. That's obviously used in conjunction with the work that your team, Rachael, is doing, and the field officers. Today we're going to look at some of last year's results, because it's very exciting... We have our second survey about to commence. We wanted to give listeners the chance to learn about the survey and what it's for, in case they are contacted by the people conducting the survey - and they might want to participate. So, we'll just start with an overview of the last survey. Bridget, you were involved in getting it up and running. How did you decide what sort of things go into it?

- BL: So, I think it's important to start with why we do the survey, which you've touched on. We're an independent body, and so while we do receive information from state governments and other entities and organisations, we also look to gather information directly, ourselves, from individuals in the public. That means that the information we're getting isn't put through a filter by other government agencies or entities. We're receiving that data raw. As an independent organisation, that's critical for us. We also have a requirement, under the legislation, to engage with the Australian community in relation to the management of Basin water resources. So, we do that through a number of means. Field officers is one, as Rachael has talked about; the survey is another as well. The intention of the survey and getting it up and running in the first place is that we intended to form a baseline of data and evidence that can be used annually, so that we can track trends over time as well. As I said, the thought behind this survey is that it doesn't only gather information for the Inspector-General, but that it gathers broader community sentiment regarding water management. We use this information in our work with Basin states to help guide them around some of the sentiment we're hearing around compliance and enforcement and other water management issues as well.
- AH: So, the survey interviewed five main groups, you'd call them. You had water licence holders, community advocates, active users, community bystanders, and First Nations people. Obviously, water licence holders generally have a pretty good idea of what's going on in the Basin and the plan and what it's about. But for those who aren't water licence holders, there was quite a low level of Basin knowledge - would you say?
- BL: I think we found that that's correct. I do think it's important to note that the methodology we used, and the people we interviewed, that we work really hard to make sure that the percentages of people that we do engage with is reflective of the Basin population. So, ABS data is used to work out what percentages of those various groups exist in the Basin, and we work to make sure that that's reflective of the numbers of people we interview. Overall, we did engage or interview or survey over 1,200 people across those 5 groups. As you say, we find that the levels of water literacy are much higher particularly among water licence holders, because it naturally affects their day-to-day operations or livelihoods. But what it means for us is that when we do try and engage with people, we have a broad spectrum of people who may not know that they live in the Murray-Darling Basin, and therefore may not hold a strong incentive or drive to learn about it, right through to licence holders who are often highly-educated and well-versed in water management issues. What that means for us is when we're engaging or communicating, we have a really broad spectrum of people and that we must be mindful of that.

- AH: And even though there wasn't a great deal of Basin knowledge, there was strong support for an enforcement and compliance element in the Basin - so, a role like the Inspector-General - with water licence holders having the strongest level of support for a federal body to oversee those rules and regulations across the Basin. But what were some of the other concerns that people mentioned in the survey? That could be around myths or misperceptions and things like that...
- BL: Yes. So, I think we looked at two areas. We looked at support for the Basin Plan and looked to understand what the drivers behind low confidence or low support in the Basin Plan might be. And what we found, actually, was that among water licence holders, support for the Basin Plan was at around 48%. And, likewise amongst the community, it was roughly 46% of the community that also supported the intentions of the Basin Plan. We actually found that, in those categories, it was only around 20% of water licence holders and community members who were unsupportive of the Basin Plan or didn't support the intentions of the Basin Plan. There was around 33 to 34% of both of those categories who were unsure or undecided. When we drilled down further, we found that a lot of the drivers behind that were that people don't know where to get information, or they don't understand what the Basin Plan is intended to do or how it works. We also found that a lot of individuals didn't understand the different layers of government and the roles they play - which isn't surprising, because it is an incredibly complicated space.
- AH: Something I found interesting, looking at the research myself, was that one of the main sources of information that people go to for information about water management and the Basin Plan and anything like that in the Basin, is word of mouth and through the community. Is that reason to be concerned? Because there might be levels of misinformation going through the community?
- BL: It certainly makes it tricky. When, as government agencies, you may be trying to communicate, especially as an independent body trying to give out messaging or information that's independent, it can be difficult. We found that government agencies are at about number 5 or 6 in the list of sources.
- AH: Quite low.
- BL: Yeah. So, word of mouth is what people will go to first; then they go to their workplace, other community members, and also the news and media. I think some of the risks we see with that is sometimes those stories can be negatively skewed or focus on the bad elements. But, as you say, sometimes when people are getting information from word of mouth, it may be that some of those myths or misperceptions are being replicated. That can make it tricky, for us, when we're trying to get people to listen to governments as a source of information - or ourselves in particular.
- AH: We talked a little bit about the research looking at the Basin plan. What other things did the research find about that?
- BL: While we found a relatively strong level of support for the Basin plan, when we asked the community about their sentiment or feelings towards water management more generally - which is broader than the Basin plan, and includes state government, compliance regimes, and decision-making at state level, we saw confidence drop off significantly. So, for community confidence in or feelings towards water management, only 6% of the

community felt positive about that - as opposed to 46% of the community feeling or supporting the Basin plan, for example. First Nations people were only 8% confident or positive about the management of water, and water licence holders were only 19%. So, it's still higher than the other categories, but relatively low in terms of the confidence or positive feelings towards water management more generally.

AH: So, what are people's feelings and perceptions?

BL: In relation to this, we drilled down to what some of the drivers are for why people are feeling this way and there were some positive perceptions, such as that environmental flows have improved biodiversity, and that water management encourages greater efficiency. But we did hear a lot of negative perceptions as well - such as decisions about the Murray-Darling Basin are driven by political motives. That was a quite a strong theme that came out from the community members. That government organisations don't work together effectively towards the national outcome is another. That's been one of the driving pieces of data or evidence that we've used to fuel the regulatory leaders forum, which is a forum that was established by the Inspector-General, with the regulatory leaders of each state. They get together quarterly and work through some of these issues that each state does in their own way. They're entitled to run things their own way, but we find that we uncover the same issues or the same difficulties and so we get together to work on some of those things and how we might approach reporting or building confidence as a Basin, or as a nation, instead of at a state-by-state level.

AH: Would you hope to see that by the time we do this survey next time - and there's a question around governments not working together or agencies not working together - would you hope to see that maybe there's been a shift of the dial there?

BL: It might be a little bit early. We're only in the early stages and we haven't really done any public information about that yet. But on our website you'll find a metering report card, which is working with the Basin states, through the regulatory leaders forum, to create transparency around the status of metering by state. So, that's one of those products that we're working on to provide that whole of Basin transparency. We're also working towards compliance performance reporting with the states, which is really a product that will demonstrate the different compliance activities that the states are undertaking, how they go about compliance, and therefore a level of public reporting that demonstrates or brings about a level of assurance of people that compliance has been undertaken effectively in each of those states.

AH: As part of the research, it broke down what some of the key issues were. So, what were the top three or four concerns of people in the survey?

BL: Yes, so in relation to the generic water management question, where there were lower levels of confidence, we drilled down to find out what some of those drivers behind the lower levels of confidence or positive sentiment towards water management were. We thought it might relate to compliance and enforcement, but actually that was not a top of mind concern for the majority of respondents to the survey. Rather, we found there were three issues to focus on. Number one was on distribution and allocation of water. It was around 36% of people demonstrated a low level of confidence, and said that that was a driver for them, the lack of transparency around decision making, and around allocations and distribution of water. Number two was concerns around the

sustainability of water take, or level of supply available. Level with that was concerns around the quality of water. 26% of people in that category showed concerns around both of those issues. And the third concern was that people believed there was a mismanagement of water occurring. So, they were the drivers behind the low levels of positive community sentiment regarding water management in the Basin.

AH: Are those survey responses broken down by water licence holder, community member, et cetera? Or is that just generally speaking?

BL: That's generally speaking. We also don't break down the data by state, necessarily, because our approach is to try to approach some of the community sentiment issues as a Basin. In the next round, that Rachael might talk about shortly, we will be doing some more detailed surveys where we can drill down into some of these issues, possibly by location or by theme over time to give us that next level of information.

AH: How do we tackle these concerns in the community? Can we tackle these concerns?

BL: I think firstly it comes back to the fact that because water is so complicated, some of these issues don't actually relate to the role of the Inspector-General, but when you're surveying people you can't necessarily say, 'I only want to speak to you about these issues, and not these other ones,' because water is all entwined. So, number one, we first consider whether it relates to the role of the Inspector-General. If it's really a state responsibility, what we do is we take the data and we share it with the state governments through that regulatory leaders forum. We say 'Look, you need to be aware that this was coming through as a strong theme. People have concerns around the transparency of decision making and water allocations.' So, what we do is we make sure we take that information - it's not wasted - and share it with the regulatory leaders forum and let them know that they have an issue. And, in that instance, in the regulatory leaders forum, they may need to take it back to their central government as well. But we do make sure that the information is shared with all appropriate agencies, even if it doesn't fall within our remit.

AH: There's obviously distrust of government and government agencies. We don't want to be one of those agencies where people go, 'I spoke to the Inspector-General, but they didn't do anything about it.'

BL: That's right. I think that, for those issues that do fall within our remit, like the coordination between government agencies, we've identified that we do have a role or could have a role to play there. So, we've taken the initiative, for example, in that instance to set up the regulatory leaders forum. In other instances, for example, the myths that you mentioned before, we have yourself, Annabelle, and our media team which is working sometimes helping to rectify some of those myths or misperceptions, or at least acting as a conduit for people to go to the right areas for information. That is, I think, another theme that came out. 50 to 60% of people interviewed said that they felt there was not enough information about water. I think the reality is that we know there is a lot of information about water - possibly too much! - but there's not one collective space that people can easily go to. There's many, many, many websites, all sharing different types of information.

AH: That's what we've found as part of the Steady as it flows Report, as well, which I think you were involved with and we've done a podcast on before.

BL: That's right.

AH: So, we can link that in the show notes, if anyone's interested.

BL: Absolutely.

AH: But there's so many different avenues that people can go down to get information that it can almost seem overwhelming.

BL: Yeah. And trying to pull the information together yourself - because many agencies have many different roles, but a holistic approach to water information doesn't exist at the moment.

AH: Well, we might talk about the next survey, which is going to be coming out soon. We'll talk about that with Rachel. So, what's the next survey going to entail? When's it kick off? When can people expect to start hearing from the people conducting the survey?

RM: Yeah. Thanks, Annabelle. We're pretty excited. The next survey is going to be completed in this last quarter of this year. And we'll have all of the results in early 2024. So, it's going to be great to have this smaller survey at the end of this year. The largest survey will be the bi-annual - so, every second year - and then we'll do that smaller survey in between. It'll be great to have that continuous data and to see where we are with the trends and the themes.

AH: So, what sort of things are you looking at asking people in this next survey?

RM: The three different themes that we're going to be looking at are compliance and enforcement, with the findings relating to the understanding of perceptions and the behaviours. The second one is the findings relating to the Inspector-General of Water Compliance. The third thing we're going to be looking at, for this smaller survey, is the indicators and drivers of community sentiment across the Basin.

AH: Is that community sentiment towards the Basin Plan or towards water management in general? Is it anything specific?

RM: It's a couple of those things. Part of our role as an independent oversight or integrity agency is understanding some of the drivers of the community that would increase confidence across the areas you talked about, Annabelle. So, cross-water management but also cross-confidence in the delivery, for example, of the Basin Plan. If we can understand what those drivers are, then we can work with governments, state governments and the Commonwealth government, to ensure that either they work to address those. Or, if we can do something within our remit, then we consider that as well as part of our annual work plan. It's a lot smaller than we did last year. They will be looking at about over 1,000 people to be surveyed, still.

AH: Are we still getting the number there?

RM: It's representative. It's just a smaller survey. There's still just as many people being surveyed, but just with fewer questions.

BL: Absolutely.

AH: It's easy to get through.

RM: Yeah, that's it. We'll just finish off the year with that.

AH: And so why is it shorter than the bi-annual version?

RM: We don't want to crowd people. We don't want to overwhelm people. We just want to be able to get that information when required. We don't need to do it every single year and ask the same questions over and over again. We need to get the big one, then do the small one, compare it, and then compare it each year.

AH: So, after reading all the results of the last survey, I wonder if each of you could share with me something interesting about the results, or something that might have shocked you, or stood out to you. I might go with you first, Bridget.

BL: I think the key takeaway, or the thing that stood out for me the most, was that while we were relatively new agency and a lot of people still didn't know we existed, we undertook this survey and we asked the question, 'Is it important to have an independent federal body overseeing water rules and regulations across the Basin?' And across all categories we got overwhelming support for an independent federal body - which is exactly what the Inspector-General for Water Compliance is.

AH: So we'll remain in business - hopefully - for a bit longer!

BL: I think it's positive to show that there is a community need or a community want for this. You know, with 72% of the community saying it was important, and 76% of First Nations, and 84% of water licence holders supporting an independent federal body?

AH: It's pretty high.

BL: Yeah, it is. And it indicates strong support for the role that we play. And, as Rachael said, with the survey this year, we hope to see an increase in the number of people who know who we are and what we do.

AH: What about you, Rachel?

RM: Yeah, thanks, Annabelle. The interesting thing that I found was that, of those who had heard of the Basin or identified as living in it, and know they live in it, only 6% were able to identify all of the states that are in the Basin.

AH: And the Territory!

RM: That's right. The ACT, being the least well-known. I grew up in the ACT. I can honestly say that when I was growing up in the ACT, I had no idea that we were in the Basin there either. So, I find that really interesting.

AH: I actually didn't know that the ACT was in the Basin until I started working here! So, it goes to show. Obviously, in comparison to the other Basin states, it's quite a small water user, in the scheme of things, but that doesn't mean it's not part of the Basin.

RM: Absolutely.

BL: And it's the largest city in the basin. And most densely populated.

AH: So, can people even participate in the next survey?

BL: So, part of the methodology behind this survey is that the people we survey must be indicative of the population in the Basin. So, using the Australian Bureau of Statistics data, there is a really strong methodology of both qualitative and quantitative processes that we undertake to ensure that the results we get are reflective of the population in the Basin. There's a lot of work we put into that, but unfortunately that means it's not open for the general public. People who are generally interested in water are more likely than to fill out the survey - which can skew our data. And it would skew the data from us knowing how many people know they live in the Basin, or the work we have to do to make sure people understand the role that the Basin plays. So, no, the survey is closed to the general public. But, certainly, if you've got any questions, feel free to reach out to us or come and see us at the field days, or reach out through our phone number.

AH: Our phone number, which is 13 44 92. Well, thank you, Bridget and Rachael, for your first ever appearance on *Water's Edge*. I'm sure there will be plenty more to come and we'll have to wrap up the next survey. But, as always, for anyone listening, if you want to find any of the work that we do at the Inspector-General of Water Compliance, including our annual community sentiment survey results, you can find that on the publications page of our website. That's igwc.gov.au. And you can also get in touch with us by our phone, as I mentioned before, on 13 44 92. Thank you so much, Rachael and Bridget, for joining us.

RM: Thanks, Annabelle.

BL: Thanks, Annabelle.

Speaker 1: *Water's Edge* is produced by the Inspector-General of Water Compliance, Australian Government, Canberra. For more information, visit www.igwc.gov.au.