## WATER’s EDGE: TRANSCRIPT

**Episode 5: ‘**[**Working collaboratively: how the ACT is helping Basin water management be more collaborative**](https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/waters-edge/working-collaboratively-how-ig49ZIUOzMd/)**’**

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. How the ACT's water use is small but significant compared to other Basin states.

Su Wild-River: When most of the water is used for city or municipal services. So, over 70% of the ACT's water allocation is for urban water supply.

AH:     And some of the benefits that come with being a small but mighty Basin jurisdiction.

SW: One example of this was when somebody's meter was due to be read. They rang up and said, 'Look, there's a brown snake in the shed. Do you reckon you could wait till next week?'

AH:     I'm your host, Annabelle Hudson, and welcome to this final episode of Season 2 of *Water's Edge,*where we chat to Dr Su Wild-River, from the ACT's EPA.

Speaker 1: Welcome to *Water's Edge*.

AH:     According to the IGWC's annual community sentiments survey, only 15% of people know that the ACT is actually a part of the Murray-Darling Basin. And, while the ACT makes up only a small part of the Basin compared to other states, it still brings significant economic and environmental benefits to the Basin. In this final episode of Season 2 of Water's Edge, we chat to Dr Su Wild-River. Su is the ACT's delegate on the regulatory leaders forum and from the ACT's EPA. Welcome to *Water's Edge*, Su.

SWR:  Thank you, Annabelle.

AH:     So, how did you get into water management? It's quite a complex field, water, so what drew you to this space?

SWR:  Sure. So, you're asking about my background. My surname, Wild-River, is actually part of my background. I changed my name to Wild-River when I was 16. I did that to associate myself with my belief in sustainability and my love of water, in particular.

AH:     Wow. 16? That's a young age to know that's what you want to pursue.

SWR:  That's right. So, I have actually been a white-water kayaker, and I'm still a very keen bodysurfer.

AH:     In Canberra?

SWR:  And a snorkeller. No, I go down to the coast to do my bodysurfing! I have over 30 years of work driving sustainability and environmental outcomes in a whole lot of different spheres. I have a background in academia, in facilities management, non-government organisations, consulting, policy roles, as well as regulation. The work I've done has been all over Australia, but in particular in Queensland, NSW, and the ACT. So, with regard to my role in water management within the ACT, my background includes research which I conducted as a consultant. I also chaired a rivercare group - Friends of Mungalo [?] River, which is outside the Murray-Darling Basin, only just, to the east. That focused on protecting the river's biodiversity and coordinating a regional landcare group as well. In terms of water regulation in particular, the ACT is a very small jurisdiction. Everybody who works in the ACT government does a large range of different roles. It's very difficult for any of us to work in great depth in any one area because there's so much that we need to cover. So, my role in water regulation in the ACT is part of Access Canberra. In 2015, the ACT put most of its regulators together into Access Canberra, and included the EPA there as the ACT's primary environmental regulator. So, the EPA was put in there. Our legislation is written so that the environmental protection authority encompasses water regulation. That meant that water regulation came into Access Canberra as well. So, whereas larger water regulators would have their own communications teams and legal experts and compliance teams, we share those with the rest of Access Canberra. So, you do become a sort of jack-of-all-trades - but not a master of one.

AH:      It sounds like you're the master of water regulation. Research by the Inspector-General for Water Compliance has shown that, while most people know that NSW, Victoria, and South Australia are in the Basin, 30% of people know that Queensland is in the Basin, but only 15% of people realise that the ACT is in the Basin. I actually didn't know that the ACT was in the Basin until I started in this role. So, I'm one of those people who didn't realise. Why do you think that there is such a small number of people who do realise that the ACT is part of the Basin?

SWR:  The ACT is actually very similar to other states in a lot of other things. For instance, what I picked up was that the ACT is very similar to other states in recognising the importance of compliance and enforcement in water resource laws. So, just under 50% of people in the ACT and the rest of the Murray-Darling Basin think that enforcement is very important for themselves, and around 75% think that it's important for Basin communities as well. So, what you've seen is that the ACT is more similar than different.

AH:      The Canberra bubble is what people think of, and they think of politicians when they think of the ACT. It's obviously so much more than that. What sort of water users do you have here?

SWR:  That is such a great question, Annabelle. What sort of users do we have in the ACT? Well, the ACT regulated community differs significantly from the others. Canberra is the largest city in the Murray-Darling Basin. We are the only jurisdiction where most of the water is used for city or municipal services. So, over 70% of ACT's water allocation is for urban water supply.

AH:      Wow.

SWR:  Yeah. So, unlike agricultural water, most of that urban water supply ends up getting treated and put back into the river. So, our total water take is much less compared with our net water take. The other notable users after that urban water supply are things like parks and gardens, golf clubs, and about 8% is for agriculture - which is much less than for other jurisdictions.

AH:      A lot smaller. That's interesting. I didn't realise that the water from the Basin supplies the urban water supply as well. How does that well in terms of metering? Does it have to be metered the same as agricultural water, for example?

SWR:  Yes, it does. The urban water supply has to meet the same Australian standard for metering as any water supply. But we have a huge advantage over other jurisdictions in terms of our large water user as well, which is ICON Water, which supplies the ACT's urban water. So, usually, when an agricultural water user has a very large water allocation, they will actually be taking that water from a lot of different dams, rivers, and other supplies. In the ACT, there's just a few really big dams. So, those have enormous pipes. And the metering meets a very high standard for its compliance. So, what we have is one water user that takes 70% of our water, that is used by all Canberrans. But the take is by this one very high-compliant water user, for the municipal water supply. So, it exceeds the average in terms of the quality of the compliance. Very easily. Then we have the remainder. There are a few other large-ish water users. So, those other ones I mentioned are agriculture, parks and gardens, and the golf courses. Between them, they make up about 20%. Again, those are well-regulated, high-compliant ones. So, they have meters that are tested and they're good and they've got the bigger pipes and things. So, we identify those as our high-risk take, as they are our second-largest group. But, again, there's a very small number of those and they are, in a sense, easy to regulate. Then we have, like all the other jurisdictions, a very long tail of extremely small water users that are a bit harder to get into the same type of compliance regime as the IGWC wants to see across the whole Basin. Just because they're only using, say, 5,000 litres a year or something. So, it's a very small amount of water take.

AH: Do you know what percentage of water the ACT uses when compared to the rest of the Basin?

SWR:  The ACT uses 0.1% of the total water take from the Murray-Darling Basin.

AH:      What? 0.1%?!

SWR:  Yes. We are tiny. So, we use about 1,000th of all of the Murray-Darling Basin. It's a very small amount.

AH:      Even with the most densely populated city in all of the Basin?

SWR:  Yes. It's partly because we do the net calculation. So, you turn on your tap, get water, flush your toilet, water goes away. The net take that we have is less. We don't lose as much. When you use water for agriculture, it doesn't tend to go back into the river. But, in fact, the number I've quoted you, the 1000th, is the total, not the net. I just got that off the actual water amount.

AH:      So, it would be even less than that, if you thought about the net?

SWR:  Yes. It's really small. We're absolutely tiny. So, some other key statistics that show how different we are: we are the only jursidiction where every point of water take has a meter.

AH:     Okay.

SWR:  So, 100% of our water take is metered. What that adds up to is that we have 325 water access entitlements, which comprise 184 groundwater entitlements, 29 surviving entitlements - which means they precede the current legislation, and they include ground and surface water - and 112 for surface water. Other jurisdictions have maybe 500 times that in water access entitlements. Our water regulating team, which does pollution prevention and the Lakes Act [?] work, and the water regulation, are just three people. They tend to know on a first-name basis all of our licence holders. And they know that team of three. So, it's really a completely different story.

AH:     Yeah. Despite that it is such a small percentage of water take in the Basin, it's still important to undertake enforcement and compliance activities. So, what are some of the things the ACT has been focusing on in this space?

SWR:   So, we absolutely agree with the whole spirit of the IGWC’s work - that enforcement matters very much. Our single very large water access entitlement, which is held by Icon Water, for urban water supply, has a very high degree of compliance. Their reporting's really detailed. Everything's really top shelf with our one big water user, so our level of confidence is extremely high for that water take. Outside of that, we assess water use by license holders to ensure that extraction doesn't reach a level that negatively impacts on our aquatic ecosystems. Last year, water used by license holders was below the volume of water held in those entitlements and there were no detections of non-compliance with license conditions. Now, that was partly because it was a very wet year. People didn't have to take as much water.

AH:     Especially when you're thinking about those golf courses and things like that!

SWR: That's right. And the parks and gardens in the ACT - mowing was much more of a problem than watering over the last year! So, we are the only jurisdiction where all the licensed water is metered and can also therefore be accurately measured. We do conduct an inspection regime, which aims to have each of the meters personally inspected at least once every three years, or at more frequent intervals as required. So, the larger water users, amongst them, have it more often than the smaller ones. And sometimes our regulated community will check their meters in between as well.  They will actually read their meters and report to us on the amount of water that they've taken. But a really big thing that we've been doing is to bring in our new non-urban water metering policy. So, this is something that is very close to the heart of the IGWC. It's an initiative that we're really a follower of, in this space. Other jurisdictions are ahead of us with this, but this week the ACT government adopted a new non-urban water metering policy.

AH: Oh, wow. Talk about timing!

SWR: I know! So, it's very exciting. The policy is based off the National Framework for Non-Urban Water Metering, which was developed from the National Water Initiative to provide a nationally consistent metering standard to improve the confidence of all Basin water users in water meter performance and accuracy. As you no doubt know, the updated Meteorological Assurance Framework 2, or MAF2, as we love to refer to it, is part of the national framework. And it's supported by metering standards specified by Australian Standard 4747. That covers meters for non-urban water supply, and it covers the installation, validation, maintenance, and verification of the meters. So, our non-urban water metering policy has been developed to meet all of those requirements, and it brings the ACT in line with other Murray-Darling Basin states who have already begun implementing those new metering standards.

AH: So, we've talked about the RLF - or the Regulatory Leaders Forum - extensively before on this podcast. For those who are new to *Water's Edge*, the RLF is a quarterly meeting of regulatory leaders from the Murray-Darling Basin. It's chaired by the Inspector-General of Water Compliance, Troy Grant, and it aims to improve collaboration between Basin states and territory - because the ACT is a territory - in relation to water compliance. So, Su, what do you think the ACT brings to the RLF and what sort of challenges do you think you face?

SWR: The benefit that the ACT brings to the RLF, and any of the other national forums that we participate in, is that the individual members have a much broader remit than any of our counterparts in any of those areas. So, whereas all of the other regulatory leaders are steeped in water regulation all day, every day, I also have touch points into environmental protection. I'm also very engaged, obviously, in municipal water supply and also in the utilities technical regulation that comes with that. So, that's making sure that the urban water meets the standards as well. We work closely with Health to make sure that the health of water users is protected. We have local government roles, so we have very close connections - as I said before - with the individual water users and their needs. And we also are much closer to ministers and all of cross-government and the whole full suite of needs. What that means is that we are often able to identify where policies might not work, or where new regulatory initiatives have a risk of failure - because we are actually connected with the end users! I personally am only one step removed from the end water users because my team of three water regulators, whom I work with absolutely on a daily basis, with all of them. If anything's going wrong or they're worried about something, then I'll know about that and I'll be able to bring that to the water regulatory forum. I'd love to tell you a bit about the benefits that we get from the IGWC. I really feel that the benefits that the ACT gets from the national forum is bigger than what the other states get, because we just learn so much. The ACT goes and sucks up the research and the experience that the other jurisdictions have amassed and we borrow and learn from the other jurisdictions. We genuinely don't have the capacity to do original research or to develop original policy. So, what we'll do is we'll often scan across and we'll look at the most appropriate tools.

AH: You can cherry pick things, essentially.

SWR: We can. So, we are often a leader in the policy space in the ACT. Again, that kind of reflects our agility. So, we have really world-leading policies on things like climate change and I know that our water minister is very keen to be very forward looking and very, very proactive in water compliance and in all things in terms of best practice water regulation and things. So, we can go and we can have that perspective and then we can just learn from the best that the other jurisdictions have brought. So, the best thing for me, and for the ACT, from the Water Regulatory Leaders Forum, has been that opportunity to go along and to listen to the troubleshooting that other jurisdictions have when they say, 'Oh, well, we tried this and it didn't work.' We can think, *Well, we're not gonna do that*.

AH: So, learning from other people's mistakes?

SWR: That's right. So, for instance, telemetry: I think it is a really good example. Best practice in terms of water metering and data capture is telemetry. And there's been a strong push nationally for the Basin states to take on telemetry. What that is, is a kind of real time, digital transfer of water meter data. It's very, very useful for farmers who are irrigating large areas because it can mean that, in real-time, they get a signal if something's going wrong, if there's too much water in one part of their farm or whatever. It doesn't work as well, though, when there's really mountainous country. And so the digital transfer of information isn't maybe as robust or reliable. So, we've been able to go to forums and find that out and think, *We are one of the hilly jurisdictions and, so, maybe not...* But also, for our tiny, tiny little water users who make up a minuscule part of the total water take in the Basin, it's just not cost effective. Because they just are not going to have a tap on that loses that much water, they would notice it in their tomato patch. So, it's not actually going very far, and it's not in big quantities, and they don't need telemetry. So, we've learned from the other jurisdictions and seen that it doesn't always work. And even other jurisdictions who are really embracing telemetry are saying it's not appropriate for all of their water users. So, we can say, 'Look, actually, we are more like those in several different ways. We are going to look for an alternative to telemetry, and we are actually pretty confident that with our absolutely tiny water users - all of whom are metered - but we can have sufficient confidence in their water take through manual meter readings done several times a year.'

AH: I guess the thing with the ACT is also that you wouldn't have the same geographical challenges as somewhere like New South Wales or Queensland, where you've got these large flooding events that might prevent people from coming to take manual water meter readings and things like that. I would imagine that's a pretty rare circumstance in the A CT.

SWR: We don't tend to get floods that stick around as much as in the flat areas of Victoria and Queensland, in particular. We do get floods, but they'll usually come and go in a couple of days at the most. That's not a big issue for us. Also, there's not many meters that we can't drive to within an hour.

AH: That's right. You don't have to book out an entire day to get to a property that's five hours away from.

SWR: Or that you have to fly to. Another really great benefit for the ACT going to the IGWC and to going to the RLF meetings is that we can make the case for why we think we should be allowed to do things a bit differently. I've just explained to you why telemetry isn't a great choice for the ACT. Well, we've had the opportunity to go to the RLF, and to make that case in amongst the other jurisdictions and directly to the IGWC, and have that case heard and understood. It's just been fantastic to have that really face-to-face contact and that ability to discuss and see if we are missing something. Often, if we are, it's been marginal. Our sense of what we're doing is fit for purpose has been reinforced by that.

AH: You've talked about all these great things and the benefits. Are there any challenges that you have experienced?

SWR: Yes, there are.

AH: Do tell!

SWR:  All right. So, one of the challenges is that we really find ourselves a bit overwhelmed by new reporting and enforcement requirements. It is difficult for the ACT to fit its regulatory context into the reporting templates. So, for instance, with some of the things we're expected to report on, we we're only ever going to have 100% or 0%. It means it looks like we're either pretending that we're really 100%, or hopeless if we're at 0%. I always have to report back to the minister that the reason we are on zero is because we don't have any, so it doesn't even apply!

AH:  I think that's really important context for people with the metering report card to understand - that that's why the ACT's data probably looks a little bit different to other jurisdictions.

SWR: That's right. It's also that there's a very significant reporting burden. We have the same reporting requirement as all the other jurisdictions. But, as I said before, there's only three people in the water regulation team. Those three people are responsible for producing a whole report that a team of 10 or so might be putting together in other jurisdictions. And so, when you flick through those reports, the ACT is a whole page alongside all of the other jurisdictions. But you have to understand that we've had to produce the same amount of data, really cover the same number of data points and data types, even though they're only for 325 water users, and we are still covering the same number of variables as all the other jurisdictions. It's still a struggle to make it work. The nature of our regulated community also makes it really hard to capture the information about our compliance and enforcement activities. So, a particular example is that our water users know all of the members of the water team. They'll ring up and ask a question or for an example of how it is in the ACT, just the other week, somebody's meter was due to be read and they rang up and said, 'Look, there's a brown snake in the shed.'

AH: Only in Australia!

SWR: 'I don't wanna go in there today. Do you reckon you could wait till next week?' And we said, 'Sure, that'll be fine.' So, on the surface, I just said that all our licence holders know who we are, you might say, 'Oh, that's regulatory capture. Watch out. Things could go wrong.' But, in fact, water meters are pretty robust and our ones, that are measuring tiny amounts, could only be out by a tiny amount of water. And really the difference in one week between measuring, taking the meter reading when there's a brown snake in the shed, that seems fair to us. It seems fit for purpose.

AH: I think that would be fair for most people.

SWR: It seems proportional to the scale of the potential risk - which, genuinely, is 'Are we taking too much water?' Well, that property is not green, you know? We'd be very quickly able to see if they were taking too much water, they're not taking too much water, and we didn't want them to be bitten by a snake. So, that's the kind of reality that we've got. And water meters? They're pretty good. Even the basic water meter - even if it's out, it's likely to be out by some percentages, and in our case not gigalitres. It might be a handful of kilolitres, but it's not going to be anything significant. Our interpretation of their metrics, because we're so small, again, might be a bit different. For instance, we are meant to be reporting on enforcement actions and warnings and things like that. Very often, those are fairly informal in our case. That's because they're so small and we know everybody. So, it might be a verbal warning. Also, engagement: in other jurisdictions, a type of engagement might be that you write a newsletter and you have an article about these kinds of things, and then you send it out to 3,000 people. What we will have done is gone out on 30 different properties, talked face to face with 30 different people about their water meters, and talked with them about the need for accuracy and things like that. That doesn't look as good, you know? We've only engaged with 30 people. Was that engagement, or not? Was it meter reading, or was it engagement? Are we supposed to double count that?

AH: The two birds, one stone thing...

SWR: That's right. The newsletter really is a surrogate for genuine communication. So, you could argue that what we're doing is better because we are really talking to the people about the importance of their meter and the importance of accuracy. We are fitting a very, very small round peg into an absolutely enormous square hole, and trying to make it make sense to everybody.

AH: Well, you've told us the challenges. Tell us the highlights.

SWR: So, it has been an absolute highlight to have a really direct engagement with Troy Grant, the Inspector-General of Water Compliance. He's really approachable and really positive. He always listens with his full attention and gives a sensible answer. It's really clear that he has approached the regulatory leaders forum with a really genuine interest in building confidence in the Murray-Darling Basin and water, water compliance. And I think that's fabulous. It's a really great goal. He really has brought that whole community of regulators together in a really collaborative and collegial way. It's been really evident over the last year to see that community of regulators developing. And, in particular, the opportunity to work with the other jurisdictions is just priceless for us. As the smallest jurisdiction, we can't undertake our own research or really be at the frontline in developing new techniques or regulatory policy. So, the RLF enables us to learn from the other jurisdictions and to approach best practice or better practice in a way that works for us in the ACT.

AH: Well, thank you very much, Dr. Su Wild River. I've really enjoyed this chat, and it's been a really great way to finish off season two of *Water's Edge*. Thank you very much for joining me.

SWR: Thanks, Annabelle. It's been a pleasure.

Speaker 1:  *Water's Edge*is produced by the Inspector General of Water Compliance Australian Government, Canberra.