



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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MEDIA RELEASE

19 December 2007

Where has groundwater study funding gone?

The whereabouts of a \$4.88M Coalition Government pre-election commitment to fund an independent study of the coal, groundwater and surface resources of the Gunnedah Basin appears to have disappeared according to the Independent Member for New England Tony Windsor.

Mr Windsor said that the funding was announced by the then Minister for the Environment and Water Resources the Hon Malcolm Turnbull on October 5 and had the welcome support of the then Member for Gwydir John Anderson.

Minister Turnbull wrote to the Chair and CEO of the National Water Commission Mr Ken Matthews on October 8 asking “.. the National Water Commission to bring forward a study proposal, under the auspices of the \$52M National Groundwater Action Plan, to assess the potential impacts of mining activities on water resources and groundwater in particular.”

In the letter, Mr Turnbull referred Mr Matthews specifically “to the study proposal prepared by the Liverpool Plains Land Management Committee and ask that the study provide the comprehensive assessment of the groundwater resources in the Gunnedah Basin, any risks to these resources posed by the expansion of coal mining in the Gunnedah Basin and the connectivity between the surface and groundwater systems.”

The Federal Election was then called on October 16 and since then a letter from the Hon John Anderson sent to Mr Matthews dated November 19 set out his understanding of the meeting and the undertaking given by Minister Turnbull that the LPLMC proposal was to be funded as a priority, not as ‘co-applicant’ or competitor with any other proposals, the project was to be funded from the National Groundwater Action Plan and it was to be managed locally in Gunnedah by LPLMC with a senior representative of the National Water Commission to sit on the Project Steering Committee.

Mr Anderson’s letter was very comprehensive being virtually minutes of the meeting.

Mr Windsor is very concerned that despite the Minister’s pre-election undertaking and confirmation and further representation by John Anderson to the National Water Commission, it appears that the funding for the study may have evaporated.

“It is very disappointing that a pre-election commitment given by a Government Minister appears to have evaporated or been overruled by the National Water Commission CEO Ken Matthews once the election was called.

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The Liverpool Plains Land Management Committee (LPLMC) put their proposal together and went through all the right channels achieving their desired outcome.

The study that was to be undertaken is a vital tool not only for the Gunnedah Basin but for other locations where mining and agricultural activities have possible impacts on each other which must be better understood through more accurate science.

Representatives of the LPLMC and Namoi Water have since met with Mr Ken Matthews to try to progress the study only to be advised by him that the letter he had received from the Minister was not sufficient authorisation and he therefore did not consider that he had received any such direction from former Minister Turnbull.

This is a totally unsatisfactory situation.

I call on Mr Turnbull to confirm the instructions he gave to Mr Matthews as indicated by John Anderson in his recollection of the meeting in his letter dated 19 November to Mr Matthews.

If this is indeed the truth then Mr Matthews must explain why he now is renegeing on the commitment provided to a community group committed to improving valuable knowledge in a field where little is known and major decisions about mining a fragile environment will be made in the very near future," Mr Windsor said.