

## Wentworth Group's Blueprint for Sustainability

In early November 2002, a group of Australian environmental scientists, the Wentworth Group, released a Blueprint for a Living Continent. In delivering a message for fundamental environmental reforms, the Wentworth Group proposed three significant changes that governments can implement immediately - end broadscale clearing of remnant native vegetation; clarify water property rights; and purchase urgently needed environmental flows for the Murray River and its tributaries. The blueprint received extensive media coverage and consideration at the highest levels of government.

One of these proposals involves granting rights over water to the producers of our "food and fibre". These rights would be considered equivalent to private property rights. The document also explores the issue of environmental subsidies for farmers, as well as ways to internalise environmental costs in agriculture.

In the midst of a drought gripping much of Australia, the report suggests that 'Australia cannot be drought-proofed'. The group argues that the state of our environment is not a result of the drought, but has been caused by poor policies and poor management. It also rightly notes that Australia's agricultural production activities are economically marginal when taking into account the consequential external costs associated with degradation of natural resources. The blueprint accordingly seeks to put in place the foundation arrangements necessary to produce a different agricultural system for Australia – one that is in harmony with its environment and able to support viable rural communities.

The blueprint recommends that Commonwealth and State governments signal an in-principle, long-term commitment to an investment strategy that would help environmental restoration work over the next 10 to 20 years with a public investment of \$20 billion. The group stresses that it is not calling for a new tax, but suggests that there are several sources of potential investment, including general revenue, Telstra's sale or an environmental levy. Considering that this is approximately 2% of the Federal Budget and half a percent of Australia's GDP, it is a small ask to restore this driest, oldest and most unique of continents. Whilst this is a positive step towards addressing Australia's water quality/resources and dryland salinity issues, several of the perspectives need to be further explored and studied before we embark on this path. Engineers who wish to engage in this issue should do so through the WWF, which is the convenor of the Wentworth Group (by calling 1800 032 551 or e-mailing enquiries@wwf.org.au).

The Wentworth Group consists of Prof Peter Cullen, Prof Tim Flannery, Assoc Prof Ronnie Harding, Dr Steve Morton, Prof Hugh Possingham, Dr Denis Saunders, Prof Bruce Thom, Dr John Williams, Prof Mike Young, Peter Cosier and Leith Bouilly..

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