

Australia: Job cuts threaten Sydney water safety

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The Sydney Catchment Authority (SCA), which oversees the dams, water catchments and the overall health of water supplied to Australia's largest city, has axed five out of six of its senior scientists' jobs.

Those to lose their positions include the director of science, two scientists specialising in microbiology and catchment management, and the principal scientist for physical chemicals. Another senior scientific testing position has been downgraded to an advisory role.

Academics and water management experts have denounced the cuts, which wipe out decades of water monitoring expertise. They have warned that the decision could lead to a serious degradation of water supplies to Sydney's 4.5 million residents.

Last year the New South Wales (NSW) state government merged the SCA with the State Water Corporation, which is responsible for rural and regional water in NSW, to form WaterNSW. The new agency has eliminated over 80 jobs, including those of the five senior scientists, as well as project management personnel, administrative workers, senior economists and engineers, during the past six months.

None of the unions or professional organisations covering these workers—the Australian Professionals, the Australian Services Union or the Community Public Sector Union—has issued a statement opposing this job destruction or warned of its implications.

University of NSW Associate Professor Stuart Khan, a water contamination expert, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the job destruction was “the worst thing to happen [to water management] in decades ... It will take one more emergency ... to remind us what a stupid mistake this is.”

The newspaper reported that four scientists from WaterNSW's Penrith facility, in Sydney's western suburbs, decided to take redundancy packages after being told that their responsibilities would be “significantly diminished” and their annual salaries cut by up to \$50,000.

The SCA was established in 1999 by the state Labor government after dangerous chlorine resistant pathogens—*Giardia* and *Cryptosporidium*—were discovered in the Warragamba Dam, Sydney's main water supply (see: “Damning documents in Sydney water contamination scandal

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The SCA's task was to monitor water quality in the catchment and deal with possible biological and chemical contaminants, including those from the agricultural and coal mining industries that may degrade water supplies. The Sydney catchment area has 21 dams and covers more than 16,000 square kilometres of land in the south and west of the metropolitan area, including several large towns.

WaterNSW management last week declared that the job cuts were part of “structural changes” at the agency, designed to “achieve greater efficiency.” NSW Water Minister Niall Blair insisted there would be “no deterioration” in Sydney's water quality or water safety monitoring in the state.

Blair's assurances are worthless. The job destruction is a cost-cutting measure to make the water industry a more attractive proposition for privatisation. Finance industry corporations and others seeking to profit from any sell off of the industry regard senior scientists and others involved in the evaluation of water catchment areas as an impost on potential profits.

Over the past two decades consecutive governments throughout Australia have sold off or corporatised various state-owned assets—electricity, gas, airlines, public transport, insurance and other key industries. The privatisation agenda was set in train by the Hawke and Keating federal Labor governments from 1983 to 1996 and carried forward by federal and state governments—Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike—backed by the trade unions.

While the water industry is one of the last remaining state-owned and run essential services, it is being systematically undermined in line with growing demands from the finance industry in Australia and internationally.

State governments have increasingly contracted out maintenance and other key aspects of the water industry, including large capital works—dams, desalination plants and other facilities—to the private sector. Between 2010 and 2013, Sydney Water, the state-owned agency that delivers Sydney's water, slashed 450 jobs, including by outsourcing 135 maintenance positions at six Sydney locations.

In December 2013, the federal government's Infrastructure Australia released a paper identifying 10 Australian water assets that could be privatised at an estimated enterprise value

of \$37.5 billion. It recommended Sydney Water be sold off. Other calls have been made for the privatisation of the Queensland Bulk Water Supply Authority, the Water Corporation of Western Australia and South Australia's SA Water.

Former Australian Competition and Consumer Commission chairman Graeme Samuel last year called for all Australian governments to consider privatising water assets.

"There is no logical reason why governments need to own the maintenance companies that maintain the supply of water to customers," Samuel told the *Australian Financial Review*. "They don't need to own the companies that install the pipes, they don't need to own the pipes, they don't need to own the dams, they can all be owned by the private sector ..."

Encouraged by the unions, which have rubberstamped outsourcing and other privatisation measures, NSW Liberal Premier Mike Baird's government announced plans in 2015 to sell off another \$20 billion in public assets.

Late last year, the NSW government moved to privatise the last remaining state-owned electricity assets (see: "Australian state government sells power generator for next to nothing") and passed legislation ending Sydney Water's monopoly.

The NSW government is currently investigating private involvement in the state's 28 wastewater facilities and last year the state-owned Hunter Water Authority, north of Sydney, outsourced the maintenance and operation of its 25 treatment plants to the multinational company Veolia.

The elimination of water scientists' jobs is another step toward privatisation of this essential service and will be followed by further job cuts.

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke this week to one senior scientist whose job was axed. Concerned about any future victimisation, the scientist wished to remain anonymous. He began by explaining the impact of the SCA's merger into WaterNSW.

"We hoped that the SCA's science component would not just be preserved but expanded. We wanted the lessons learnt from the Sydney water crisis of 1998, not just about monitoring *Giardia* and *Cryptosporidium* and that sort of thing, but our scientific understanding of the catchment, modelling, downstream river movements and other important processes to be applied across the state. Instead of that we were told that it was necessary to improve efficiency and they cut work on catchment, environment and science.

"This is really wrong, not just because I lost my job, but because the skill levels have declined and this is going to have an impact on the community. It may not happen straight away but as soon as there is a drought, major bushfires or something else, it will open up the catchment to all sorts of issues and create another water crisis.

"In the past there was a multiple barrier approach to water safety: catchment, river, reservoir and treatment. This has been

mostly reduced to the water treatment barrier. The science component has been heavily cut—from a 15-member science program group to a 6-member group—which means we don't have the knowledge base, and important development projects will not be carried out."

Asked about NSW Water Minister Blair's reassurances that there would be no degradation of water quality or frontline services, the scientist said: "Of course he says that, but if there are serious problems in the catchment areas caused by mining, coal seam gases, bacteria or even a big bushfire—there'll be nobody to deal with it.

"We were overworked, in some cases doing the work of three people, but we kept things under control. Now there are none. If something happens in ten months, who will be responsible? No one. The water minister and other politicians who have destroyed people's lives will probably be gone and whoever is left will say, 'Oh dear, mistakes have been made and we have to change this.'

"In this industry there has to be a proactive approach. It's about high capacity knowledge development and preparation for the safety of the entire community. The disappearance of five scientists is not going to produce an immediate collapse, but it's like a building. If you remove five pillars from the building it will stand until there is heavy wind or a flood and then it will collapse.

"Water quality advisors are needed, not just for day-to-day operations but to look at trends. Previously we were dealing with the Sydney catchment area. Those that are left have to deal with the whole state. More toxins and other things are being disposed into the catchment areas and they will not be properly monitored.

"At the end of the day, SCA had a \$120 million operating budget. The scientists they cut probably cost about \$1 million per year and the catchment people might take it up to about \$3 million, which is probably less than 2 percent of the budget.

"I'm not interested in scare-mongering or exaggerating, and I'm not opposed to change, but we've gone back by about 20 years and I'm worried and disturbed about it. The people still there will work very hard but standards will drop and this is going to produce a problem sooner or later and people need to be warned about it."



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