

Water contamination widespread across regional Australia

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Official water safety reports, obtained by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) after a protracted legal battle, provide an insight into the state of water supply in rural towns across New South Wales (NSW), Australia's largest state. They reveal that state and local governments and corporations display complete indifference toward the health of working people.

In the past five years, more than 100,000 NSW residents have been issued with boil-water alerts because of water contamination. The five worst-affected areas are Grafton, Kempsey, Scone, Jindabyne and Merimbula.

The 40,000 people who live in Grafton, a town approximately 600 kilometres north of Sydney, are at risk of being exposed to cryptosporidium, a parasite that can cause respiratory and gastrointestinal illness. NSW Health reported that the cause is the discharge of faecal matter from cattle into the Clarence River.

Residents in Grafton and the surrounding areas have been issued 10 boil-water alerts since 2006—approximately one a year—in response “to the inability of the water supply system to manage risks.” The region lacks the appropriate infrastructure and standards to ensure safe drinking water.

A case study conducted by Ocean Watch revealed that industrial liquid wastes are licensed to be discharged directly into the Clarence River from surrounding businesses, including aquaculture (prawn farms), sewage treatment works and timber mills from Grafton and surrounding areas.

The Healthy Rivers Commission's *Independent Inquiry into the Clarence River System* (1999) identified that the major causes of pollution in the Clarence River are run-off from urban and rural residential areas; erosion and run-off from grazing and

cultivated land; discharges from sewage treatment plants and septic systems; and run-off from irrigation areas.

In the Kempsey area, approximately 200 kilometres south of Grafton, cyanobacteria, a toxic blue-green algae, has contaminated water systems and placed 15,000 residents at risk. The ABC reported that “grazing dairy cattle and raw sewage discharges near the Steuart McIntyre Dam” have been the source of the algae contamination.

The Steuart McIntyre Dam supplies water to Kempsey and the nearby towns of Jerseyville, Frederickton and Clybucca. The document presented by the ABC warned that “all pathogen groups,” including e-coli, are present in the region's water systems.

In 2014, the Kempsey Shire Council made the decision to source its water supply from the Steuart McIntyre Dam. After the change, the Council declared that “residents may notice a slight difference in the taste of the water since this change. A slightly earthy taste in the water is normal due to the background algae growth that occurs during summer in the Dam. Residents are assured that the drinking water is monitored on a daily basis ... and is safe to drink.”

An article published in the *Macleay Argus* in 2013, Kempsey's local newspaper, declared that “sporadic issues with odour and discolouration of drinking water... are within national guidelines and pose no threat to public health.”

A spokesperson from shire council explicitly stated in the article that the installation, operation and maintenance processes associated with filtration were not being completed because of the cost. He stated: “No water filtration means lower costs and increased risk, but the risk can still be managed properly.”

Residents at Merimbula, a town 450 kilometres south

of Sydney situated on the Bemboka River catchment, have received four boil-water alerts from the Bega Valley Council in the past decade.

The ABC report documented that the catchment is contaminated by “onsite sewerage system discharges,” “failures and presence of septic systems” and run-off from dairy farms upstream. It warned that chlorine-resistant pathogens had not been filtered or received chemical treatments, threatening more than 40,000 residents in the area.

In the Upper Hunter, approximately 6,000 residents in Scone, Murrurundi and Aberdeen, regional towns situated northwest of the industrial city of Newcastle, are rated at “very high risk” from dangerous pathogens flowing from an abattoir and septic tanks in the catchment.

Such contamination is not without precedent. Orica, the Australian transnational offshoot of the British giant ICI, one of the world’s largest manufacturers of mining and commercial explosives, discharged effluent containing high concentrations of arsenic into the Hunter River near Newcastle in 2011.

The revelations are by no means limited to regional and rural areas, Doctor Ian Wright, a Western Sydney University professor and leading water scientist, reported last month that millions of litres of highly toxic water were escaping from a derelict coal mine into one of Sydney’s water catchments.

Wright reported the existence of heavy metals far exceeding safe environmental in the Wingecarribee River, pointing to extremely high median concentrations of nickel (430 ug/L), manganese (12667 ug/L), and zinc (1400ug/L)—which is 120 times higher than the normal baseline level.

Across regional and rural NSW, the cost of introducing water filtration systems is estimated to be between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion. Since 2012, only a measly \$7.3 million has been invested into programs to improve drinking water quality.

Last year, the Sydney Catchment Authority axed 80 jobs, including five of its six leading scientists, after the NSW state government merged it with the State Water Corporation to form WaterNSW.

State and local governments insist that no money exists for the installation of high-quality filtration systems across the country to guarantee the provision of safe, healthy drinking water for all communities and

families. Yet corporations are making record profits and the richest sections of society are amassing ever-greater amounts of wealth.

The exposure of contaminated drinking water in regional Australia recalls the lead contamination of the water supply in the US city of Flint, Michigan. The Flint council switched its water supply to the highly-polluted Flint River, away from the Detroit catchment, to slash operation costs.

Healthy water is one of the most basic requirements of life. From the US to regional Australia, the anarchy of the capitalist market and the class contempt of the ruling elite has placed the health of tens of thousands of people at risk.



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