Government has no solution to Australia's water crisis

Martin Scott
16 October 2019

A report released last month by WaterNSW, the state-owned corporation charged with operating rivers and dams in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), projected that some cities and town could run out of water before the end of the year.

Local government officials have rushed to assure residents that the dire projection is only a worst-case scenario, and that with the imposition of drastic water restrictions, councils will be able to provide residents with running water until sometime next year.

The extent of the crisis should not be underestimated, however.

Burrendong Dam, which provides water for Dubbo's 40,000 residents, as well as thousands more in nearby towns, is at 4.3 percent of capacity. The dam is fed by the Macquarie River, which will soon cease to flow, after emergency diversions are put in place to supply water to towns of Cobar and Nyngan.

Those two towns—with a combined population of around 6,000—are dependent on a 77-year-old channel to deliver water from the Macquarie River, 60 kilometres away. Up to 50 percent of the water is lost through evaporation and transpiration because the channel is unlined and uncovered, yet plans to replace the channel with a pipeline have remained on the books for decades.

Although wealthy mining companies in the region are major consumers of water supplied by the channel, the financial burden of upgrading rests on the local council, and therefore the local residents.

At least 30,000 more residents—in Parkes, Cowra, and Forbes—face the prospect of their town water supply running out as soon as March next year.

The city of Tamworth, with a population of around 60,000, has refused to estimate a "day zero" when water supply will cease, because, according to council director Bruce Logan, "there is no alternative." That is, the possibility is so unthinkably disastrous that the council is choosing to put its head in the sand.

Instead, residents and local businesses will face increased water restrictions in the hope that the catchment receives significant rain. Tamworth is already under "level 5" restrictions, meaning all outdoor use of water by residents is prohibited.

In some areas, extreme water restrictions limit the use of evaporative coolers, posing significant health risks, particularly to the elderly, in regions where summer temperatures frequently exceed 38 degrees Celsius (100 degrees Fahrenheit).

As a result of water restrictions, firefighters in Warren, on the Macquarie River, have been forced to watch houses burn down, as long as no one is inside, and there is no threat to neighbouring properties.

With the 2018-19 bushfire season already off to a disastrous start, the lack of water for firefighting is likely to have dire consequences.

Many local councils are sinking new bores in an attempt to tap into groundwater in the Great Artesian Basin, but this is not without problems.

Bore water is often unpalatable, and high in sodium, forcing residents to buy bottled water. Many are unable to bear the expense.

Some towns, such as Walgett in far-western NSW, have resorted to crowdfunding campaigns to provide residents with safe drinking water.

There is also concern among scientists that Australia's groundwater systems are not being adequately monitored. Little is known about the effect of climate change on groundwater.

A 2012 report by the National Water Commission revealed that many of the country's 23,000 monitoring bores are 30 to 60 years old and beginning to fail, but little action has been taken since the release of the report.

Without careful monitoring and metering, there is a very real danger that the disastrous mismanagement of Australia's rivers, exemplified by the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, will be repeated below the surface.

NSW Water Minister Melinda Pavey admits the situation is "critical," and has called for urgent action from the federal

© World Socialist Web Site

government. However, she defended the NSW government's handling of the crisis, suggesting that the desperate water shortages are solely due to the prolonged drought now affecting 94.6 percent of the state.

She said "in 2016 the state was awash with water," but that it had since suffered record low inflows of water into catchment areas.

This conception that drought is simply an unpredictable and isolated phenomenon is typical of the attitude of governments in Australia and elsewhere.

Weather conditions in recent years have certainly not been favourable. Last year was Australia's third warmest on record. Average rainfall for the south-eastern quarter of the country was the seventh lowest, with many regions receiving the lowest-ever annual rainfall.

The period since January 2017 has been the driest recorded 32-month period (commencing in January) in the Murray-Darling Basin, Border Rivers, Macquarie–Bogan, Namoi, Gwydir, and Castlereagh catchments. Eastern Victoria and eastern Tasmania have also experienced record-breaking dry conditions over the same period.

However, conditions are unlikely to improve either in the near future, or in the longer term as climate change leads to rising temperatures and unstable climatic conditions internationally. The Bureau of Meteorology is predicting below average rainfall for most of Australia for the rest of 2019 and the early part of 2020, and above average maximum temperatures from October to January.

The drought relief programs of the federal Liberal National government are pitifully small and aimed at assisting big business, including agribusinesses. It recently announced $100 million in drought assistance funding, in addition to their existing $7 billion drought package, but most of this will not be spent for many years.

Of the latter package, $3.9 billion has been invested in the Future Drought Fund, with the profits to be reinvested until the fund reaches $5 billion—expected to be in 2028-29. Starting in July 2020, this fund will be used—at the rate of $100 million per year—for "drought resilience" projects under a "rolling four-year high-level framework" that is yet to be developed.

Another $1 billion is set aside for low-interest loans for drought-stricken farmers, which will likely serve to push them further into debt.

An allocation of $750 million will go to the National Water Infrastructure Development Fund to build dams and pipelines, mostly for the benefit of agricultural businesses.

NSW Planning Minister Rob Stokes last week announced that he will sign off on new dam applications in order to fast-track their construction—in other words, the government will undermine consultation with the communities affected and environmental and other long-term considerations.

Stokes is not the only politician urging the construction of new dams. Federal Water Minister David Littleproud recently lamented that states had done "three-fifths of bugger all" to build new dams, and similar sentiments have been expressed by Barnaby Joyce, the former federal agriculture minister, and Anthony Albanese, the federal opposition leader.

A report from the Australia Institute has revealed that dozens of large dams have in fact been constructed in recent years, but not for the public good.

The report stated: "The recently constructed dams in the Murray-Darling Basin do not help drought-stricken towns, struggling small irrigators or the wider public. They are built with taxpayer money on private land mainly for the benefit of large corporate agribusiness like Webster Limited."

Massive irrigators have built these private dams in order to manipulate the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, a market-based scheme to allocate water across most of south-eastern Australia.

Under the plan, irrigators can be owed water, meaning that when water is flowing in the river they can take as much as 300 percent of their annual allocation to "make up" for drought years. As a result, even in wet years, downstream flows are reduced, and wetlands are prevented from receiving the periodic floods they depend on.

The construction of new dams will do nothing to address the fundamental problem with Australia's rivers: the sale of water rights in excess of the actual quantity of water present has destroyed the natural resilience of the rivers to cycles of drought and flood.

The refusal of the governments, Labor and Coalition, to take meaningful steps to address climate change, and the continued subjugation of Australia's rivers to the profit motives of big business will inevitably led to even more severe drought and water shortages in the future.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site