

THE CASE OF THE MISSING DETAILS: SECRET WATER BUSINESS IN
SYDNEY

JOHN ARCHER JULY 2005

Despite the recent rains, water levels in Sydney's dams remain perilously low. Now desalination is proposed as a practical solution by the Government, in spite of the fact that no meaningful information has been provided to the public, there has been no community debate and no consultation with those whose future is at stake here.

While the Metropolitan Water Plan is high on hype and hope, detailed documentation is so elusive and obscure one could be forgiven for doubting its existence.

"The Metropolitan Water Plan 2004 contains little planning or implementation detail," the NSW Auditor General observed in May 2005 when he called for the release of the documents supporting the assumptions and decisions made by Cabinet and the Metropolitan Water Senior Executives Committee.

Since the Committee did not keep minutes of its meetings, as required by the State Records Act 1998, we are left with no record of how and why these crucial decisions were made.

The Premier's Office and the Office of Cabinet have cited Cabinet confidentiality as the reason that this information has been withheld from public scrutiny.

Another explanation is that the more fundamental and obvious flaws in the Plan would be a source of political embarrassment to those who are promoting it.

The most disturbing of these flaws is the confident assumption by Frank Sartor that a reverse osmosis desalination plant, large enough to supply a proportion of Sydney's drinking water could be tendered, constructed and brought on-line in two or perhaps three years.

In June 2005, the Government called for expressions of interest from the private sector to build a desalination plant capable of producing between 100 and 500 megalitres of fresh water per day.

The Government's obsession with secret water business created a significant hurdle when industry representatives pointed out that there was insufficient detail provided on which to base their proposals.

Peter Wright, head of the Macquarie Bank's Community Assets Group, was fired just for implying that the EOI process might be a public relations kite flying exercise rather than the real thing!

Nevertheless the announced schedule is that the desalination project will be at the approval stage by mid 2006 in order “to ensure completion by 2008”.

This is a most unlikely scenario.

A similar reverse osmosis desal project at Tampa Bay in Florida has been a massive and costly failure. Six years after construction began in 1999, this “state of the art” facility is still only functioning in “a costly, inefficient and intermittent way” according to its disappointed owners, Tampa Bay Water.

However, even if this plant, promoted as the best of its kind in the USA was functioning at full capacity, it would only supply 125 megalitres per day, the equivalent of two hours of Sydney’s consumption.

If Tampa Bay is the best that the US desalination industry can offer, then it becomes an even more urgent matter of public interest that the Government shares the details and reasons for its assumptions.

On what basis for instance can we assume that a desalination plant, larger and more complex than any previous model, could be completed in the optimistic time frame proposed?

The Auditor General’s Report also commented on the Government’s reluctance to consider a worse case scenario in its future planning for Sydney’s water supply.

A worse case scenario worth considering would be one in which there was no significant rainfall in Sydney's catchments for another two or three years.

According to long-range CSIRO predictions this is quite possible.

At that point there would be less than a year's supply of poor quality water left in Sydney's reservoirs.

One solution is to access the deep-water storage at the bottom of the dams.

This is called "dead" water because it's below the outlet of the dam, and that's where the debris and junk and toxic contaminants accumulate in the sediment.

It is not surprising therefore that the Sydney Catchment Authority reported in its *June 2002 Drought Management Plan* that "the quality of dead water is considered poor".

But like Lazarus, the dead water has miraculously been resurrected and given a new lease of life.

Prime time TV ads in March and April present dead water as a new previously undiscovered source of "quality" water. Accessing this will cost \$106 million. It will provide an additional six months supply by mixing contaminated water

with what remains in Sydney's already depleted dams – at a cost of \$17 million a month!

Another much publicized but undetailed plan “initiative” is the allocation of \$4 million to drill for groundwater. This went ahead in spite of the Sydney Catchment Authority's advice that: “Groundwater is not a viable alternative as current resources in the wider Sydney region are negligible”.

None of the Plans currently proposed offer more than a brief reprieve.

If rain does not fall during the next three years, Sydney could well be the world's first metropolis to run out of drinking water.

In the shadow of that threat, the public is entitled to a more detailed vision of the future from those responsible for planning it.

John Archer's latest book, *Twenty Thirst Century: The Future of Water in Australia* is due for release on 4 August. www.johnarcher.com.au