Forum engages community

Over 100 people attended the recent community forum ‘Water for Western Sydney – Who will miss out?’ organised by the Cooperative Research Centre for Irrigation Futures and the University of Western Sydney.

ABC TV’s Ticky Fullerton facilitated a lively Hypothetical with the panel including people concerned about river health, local food production, urban growth, the fishing industry and the local environment. Painting a grim picture of water availability in 2015 in Western Sydney, the Hypothetical saw the mood of the forum shift from ‘despair’ to ‘hope’ as people thought beyond short-term solutions towards a wiser approach.

The Hypothetical prompted fresh thinking about our water security, including: the importance of water for the future of food production in Western Sydney; water pricing not being sufficient on its own to discourage excessive water use; and the need to use recycled water but also address community concerns about the safety of recycled water.

The event successfully fostered open communication between the community and Federal and State agency representatives, local government members, researchers and stakeholders, with the debate and question time actively engaging everyone present.

The forum was part of a federally funded Cooperative Research Centre for Irrigation Futures research project titled ‘Water and Irrigation Strategy Enhancement through Regional Partnership (WISER)’ in Western Sydney. It will be aired on TVS in early 2009 thanks to reportage by Creation TV. A selection of abridged forum comments is included in this issue.

Basant Maheshwari, Bruce Simmons & Glen Starkey

Chair’s message

The community forum was an outstanding success. Congratulations to everyone who made a contribution. As well as giving our researchers valuable information to guide their work, it has built strong linkages for future cooperation. Some of the key community messages included:

• Long term water security is the key for sustainability of food production, shelter and jobs;

• To encourage the use of recycled water we need independent, quality research to inform the public and allay any fears;

• The need to inform that the quality of treated water is fit for the purpose for which it is used;

• Agriculture provides a wide range of benefits above and beyond its considerable food production value;

• Catchments have a role beyond supplying water because green environments are a means of energy saving and social amenity.

The mood of the forum was largely optimistic. Happy Christmas to all.

Kevin Rozzoli
Mary Howard, Local Fishery Business Operator:
The Hypothetical identified for me that there are so many gaps and offshoots for water management for the South Creek Catchment and the Hawkesbury-Nepean River, that we have only grappled with the edges of reality. With population growth comes increased pharmaceuticals that enter our waterways and more environmental flows from recycled effluent.

So what happens if Warragamba stops all environmental flows, there is a drought and agriculture gets the green light to continue using recycled effluent? Is the productivity and food source that comes from the river completely forgotten? If it is planned to expand the water debate, perhaps we need to consider the foods we eat that are reliant on water from the Hawkesbury River. Including people from the metropolitan area and school children on a future panel would be ideal.

Neale Tweedie, Local Irrigator:
I wonder if the Federal government has considered a tax deduction for water tanks which could be placed under a dwelling slab or driveway to ‘green’ the community and assist in the war on climate change. Run-off is increasing as we create more housing developments so let’s capture the resource we are sending down the drains, creeks and rivers rather than build more dams at a cost to the taxpayer and a cost to the environment.

David Butcher, Greening Australia: It was a very good workshop that demonstrated the difficult task we have in front of us. The overall message is if we can do it here it can be done anywhere.

Paul Rasmussen, Local Council Member and Irrigator Group Representative:
The success of the forum in highlighting our water issues must be taken beyond the University campus and into the wider Sydney community. The forum has clearly ignited the hope that if success on this scale can be achieved here then a follow-on program across Sydney would be the catalyst for major change in the way water is viewed, valued, used and ultimately how a river ‘get well’ action plan is implemented for the Hawkesbury-Nepean river system.

Glen Starkey, CRC IF: Our researchers have gained valuable community input on water issues thanks to the forum.

It was refreshing to see the overwhelming support for the CRC IF’s research and especially for the University of Western Sydney, a CRC IF member which provides an effective focal point for our peri-urban irrigation research in Western Sydney.

The forum gave me a much better understanding of how the community in the South Creek Catchment really values the river and its environs.

Jay Kajale, Year 7, Hurlstone Agricultural High School, environmental presenter from Creation TV:
What I saw was spectacular innovation, information and ideology all about water and its conservation. The speakers discussed information, ideas and hopes about the present and the future. The panel thought of solutions to possible water problems of the future.

I took back things that most children like me, and even adults, won’t have recognised or realised. It gave the audience and me a brilliant insight into one of the most challenging questions facing the nation of Australia: ‘Will we have water for our future?’ It was a forum that made everybody present a bit wiser in terms of the problems Australia faces with water in the future.
Community forum comments...

Wayne Mitchell, Penrith City Council: What I found quite rewarding about the forum was the positive feeling and commitment of both community members and government representatives to do something about securing our water for the future.

While many challenges were highlighted and the failings of the past emphasised, there was a strong optimism amongst the forum participants.

I am encouraged that, with good evidence from science and research, the community will respond to meet these significant challenges.

A key message was that the value of water needs to be embedded in the psyche and culture of our communities. This will be best achieved by a strong education campaign, in particular focused on our children and future generations.

Ranvir Singh, CRC IF, UWS: The forum allowed the community, water managers, policy makers and researchers to share their views and opinions about water and its management. It helped me understand what the community and water managers are thinking about and what future research is needed to secure water supplies and maintain river health.

Surendara Shrestha, Researcher, UWS: Congratulations on a well organised community forum. The active participation of so many community members made this a true community forum.

In general, the community is optimistic about the future of Greater Western Sydney. While some members in attendance indicated their concerns due to past inaction, the majority of the participants were positive about the future. Everyone voiced their willingness to contribute in addressing water and related issues.

Researchers need to put additional efforts to ensure that their research generates tangible outcomes. There is a need for active community participation for this to happen.

I would also like to add that the actions or inactions in one part of the catchment impacts communities in other parts of the state.

As a suggestion for a future community forum, it may be worthwhile considering looking at challenges and issues we face on a holistic basis. As water cannot be isolated from other issues, it may be worth expanding a Hypothetical to areas such as infrastructure and education, while still focusing on water issues.

Jan Cheetham, interested community member: I found the community forum interesting to me from two points of view, the first because it was pleasing to see that a variety of people are concerned about our future water needs and responsibilities; the second because of the wide variety of expertise that is already being brought to bear on the problems.

It was enlightening because there were many aspects of urban and rural irrigation that I had not considered before, for example the amount of water recycling that is already being done on both small and large scales.

It was confirming in that I was left with the feeling that there are many ways in which we are on the right path in terms of water conservation and allocation, for example in more consideration being given to environmental flows and better ways of supplying water to crops to minimise evaporation.

It was challenging because it was quite apparent that there are so many different hurdles still to be overcome, not the least of which is the inevitable amount of bureaucracy.

It was hopeful because it was evident that much is already being done to promote the importance of water use and conservation.

I believe education of the entire community is important to inform and accustom people to new ways of looking at water usage, particularly in terms of the difference between what is essential and what is not, and also in promoting understanding of exactly what is involved in recycling water that is to be used for drinking. Perhaps a way to do this is to offer to communities incentives for water conservation initiatives.

WISE Research Partners: Universities of Western Sydney, New England, Melbourne; CSIRO Land & Water; NSW DPI, QLD DNRW

Editors: Suzie Vlaming & Basant Maheshwari
Gary Hamer

What do you do? I am part of the team in the Department of Water and Energy which coordinates and implements the Metropolitan Water Plan. My focus areas are recycling, stormwater and river health.

What are you passionate about? From my background as a fisheries biologist and manager, I’m passionate about sustainable natural resources management within the water management field. The challenge is to bring science, politics and economics into the daily and strategic decision-making of people who make a difference by what they do or don’t do each day.

Why are you involved in the WISER project? I could see the potential of some of the CRC’s South Creek Catchment research for the government agencies involved in the broader irrigation and recycling aspects of Greater Sydney’s water management.

How do you plan to contribute to the WISER project? By helping the research partners make their work highly valuable to policy makers, and to provide advice on priorities to ensure the best use of the CRC’s collective intellect and funding.

What do you hope to get out of this? A better understanding of the social and individual costs and benefits of various options for using recycled water and stormwater in urban and agricultural irrigation.

Eric Brocken, Earth Care Centre: My observation at the forum was that water management is complex and no one agency or person has all the answers.

Water is an emotional issue because people’s health, livelihoods and environmental survival may depend on water safety and security. Many people experience powerful emotions in relation to the environment’s need for water.

The focus of the forum seemed to be on water supply but water efficiency needs to be addressed vigorously; for example, by using more efficient irrigation technology and by replacing old pipes. More organic matter in soils will improve water-holding capacity and technologies such as composting toilets can reduce the need for household water by up to 30%.

We also need to reward people who are doing the right thing. Many people may have a negative view of education because it can sometimes seem patronising. Rather than telling people what to do as if they are speaking to children, we need to educate people by creating learning situations that offer feedback on more positive responses to the water crisis.

Understanding water cycles

Researchers from UWS are collecting and analysing hydro meteorological data to construct the water cycle of South Creek Catchment over 15 years from 1992 to 2006. A preliminary analysis estimates the average total inflow in the catchment is about 463 GL per year of which 427 GL per year comes from the rainfall and 36 GL per year from the potable water supply. The majority of potable water is supplied to residential properties (74%) followed by 18% to non residential properties. Nearly eight per cent or 2.74 GL per year of potable water supply is used in primary production activities.

Researchers are also developing a catchment water balance model to estimate monthly and yearly rainfall-runoff from urban and non-urban areas, evapotranspiration, potable water supply, effluent discharges and surface and ground water extractions in the catchment. This detailed quantification of water cycle components will help water managers formulate water management strategies to integrate all available water resources.

Ranvir Singh, CRC IF, UWS

Thank you for all your support at the community forum and throughout the year.

We wish everyone a wonderful and safe holiday and our best wishes for a water-conscious and prosperous 2009.