

**SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION NATIONAL WATER REFORM
INQUIRY 2024**

1 February 2024

Irrigation Australia is pleased to provide the following submission in response to the National Water Reform 2024 Call for Submissions.

Background

Irrigation Australia Ltd is the peak national organisation representing the irrigation industry. Our diverse membership includes organisations and individuals from across the supply chain including primary producers, government agencies (at federal, state and local levels), manufacturers, retailers, system designers and installers and many other service providers. We are also a Registered Training Organisation delivering accredited training – specifically in irrigation technology, management and a range of certified short courses which support qualifications with a commitment to continuing professional development.

Our other key activities include a large range of member services, conferences and regional events, waterwise programs and advocacy.

From 2024, we are implementing a series of new activities under the “Irrigation Futures” banner. It includes four key program areas:

1. Irrigation industry profile and industry policy;
2. Adoption of best practice, including research and development;
3. Industry skilling, including Irrigation Training Australia (the RTO); and
4. Industry careers.

Historically, Irrigation Australia submitted to the 2020 Inquiry; specifically on aspects of the Water Resource Accounting element.

In February, our Board will meet for an extended face-to-face strategic planning session, and we expect to hold the first meeting of our industry policy group. There is no existing clear mechanism for gathering and synthesizing input from our diverse membership into submissions such as this, and as a result this will be brief.

Submission

General

1. The irrigation industry has a critical role in food and fibre production as well as sustainable management of urban open spaces. Rapid population growth and the impacts of the pandemic have reinforced the importance of these facilities in supporting communities and mental health. The current rhetoric, particularly around the MDB debate, undervalues the importance of these functions, and the focus on the MDB to the apparent exclusion of other parts of the country have meant that a number of initiatives, e.g. water measurement have not progressed as they might have in the last 4 years. It is challenging to see how NWI principles have been observed in a balanced way in recent policy decisions.

2. The largest perceived threat to the irrigation industry is access to skilled staff. It is not a unique problem, and government investment into training programs is not insubstantial, but new approaches are required.

NWI Renewal Advice

We agree with all principles stated, but offer the following key areas of interest which do not appear to be strongly reflected:

3. Acknowledging that there has been significant disruption across all sectors since the 2020 Inquiry, we believe Governance of the Agreement is inadequate, and the lack of progress on the re-establishment of a National Water Commission as a guiding and coordinating force to support the implementation of the NWI must be addressed.
4. There is a strong will in the irrigation industry to support sustainable practices addressing key issues such as efficient application of water, energy efficiency/ carbon, environmental responsibility. There are however countless examples of poor practices driven by inappropriate specification and system management. Infrastructure development continues to be driven towards lowest capital cost to deliver. This often leads to operational inefficiency and infrastructure constructed without a sound understanding of the interrelationship between plants, soils and water. Education is part of the solution and where our RTO fits, however if we don't examine regulatory standards including options like licensed trades, our essential services are at significant risk. State-based regulation reinforces the need for national coordination.
5. Aside from accelerated changes to the way learning has been delivered, the last four years has seen virtually no improvement in addressing specific, major skilling challenges impacting all industries involved in water.
6. There are major risks around foreign investment in Australian agribusiness, including "clone" products with high failure rates being imported from Asia in particular. The market governing renewable/ recyclable irrigation products rarely demonstrates a positive cost benefit and is ripe for greater government intervention to support sustainable practices.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit. Irrigation Australia would like to express a strong interest in being involved in the next stage of engagement where I am hopeful that we will be in a stronger position to comment on broader aspects of the NWI.

Yours sincerely

Dave Cameron
Chief Executive Officer