



# TALKING WATER

An Australian Guidebook for the 21st Century



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commissioned by

**FARMHAND FOUNDATION**



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# Foreword

One of the most pressing problems confronting Australia is the vexed question of water - its conservation, its distribution, its use and its management.

Water, or the lack of it in crucial areas of this vast continent, has been a constant thorn left an indelible mark on the history of Australian settlement and growth. Added to this are droughts which affect different parts of the continent far too often.

On October 3, 2002, in the midst of one of the worst droughts since rainfall records began, the Farmhand Foundation launched a drought relief campaign to assist farming communities across Australia.

The Foundation's appeal for Australians to 'lend a hand' saw an immediate response. Contributions poured in from people from all walks of life together with a multitude of fundraising ideas, support from big and small business and Federal, State and local governments.

In association with the Australian Red Cross, Farmhand Foundation raised and distributed more than \$24 million dollars to more than 16,000 farming families across the nation.

But the Foundation had been formed not just to address the immediate impact of the drought but also to consider longer-term approaches to drought mitigation - to promote discussion and to search for ways to lessen the impact of drought on farming families and the wider Australian community.

The Farmhand Foundation prepared **Talking Water** as a book for all Australians to read. It is a reference book about Australia and its water. Despite the abundance of excellent books and documents about water in Australia, a book was needed to that pulled together all the vital water facts including information about potential water schemes and how carefully or extravagantly we use this important resource.

**Talking Water** explores a variety of schemes aimed at harvesting, storing, transporting and making the most efficient use of the water we have and outlines ways in which governments and individuals can best preserve this vital resource.

It covers a range of water schemes presented by both ordinary people and experts, in their representations to Farmhand, who are genuinely concerned about water management in this country.

**Talking Water** highlights projects that show there are farming communities in Australia who have accepted the challenge and are changing the way they use water. It pinpoints initiatives like:

- Wimmera Mallee Water project in Victoria that will replace 17,500 kilometres of open earthen channels with pipes. When finished, the work will save 93 billion litres of water each year that would otherwise have been lost to evaporation and seepage.
- The wastewater treatment project in Virginia, South Australia, where market gardeners are growing vegetables using treated wastewater effluent from Adelaide. Last year they used almost 10 billion litres of water. Leading farmers in the area believe they will double production over the next decade supporting both the local South Australian market as well as exports.

The problem is not a lack of water.

The problem is the management of water, its source, its availability, its harvesting and the infrastructure needed to respond to the demands of both society and the environment both.

Public policy has permitted our rivers to be over-allocated in some parts of Australia, leaving little of an actual flow.

We must recognise and acknowledge that our national water infrastructure is in an infant stage. More infrastructure is required as we adjust to using the water we have more wisely and generate more value from its use. Water need not be a limiting factor in the development of our nation if managed properly.

As a nation we have yet to identify the full set of water development priorities and to invest real funds into schemes that will renew our water management.

Our rural water infrastructure needs to be urgently updated to save billions of litres per year from being evaporated or leaked from uncapped bores and open irrigation channels. Rebuilding our rural water infrastructure and rejuvenating our irrigation industries needs a national commitment.

Real incentives must be provided for farmers to develop world-class irrigation systems. Funding and incentives for farming systems that generate higher valued produce, combat salinity and river decline and which allow farmers to diversify into water efficient crops, are a priority.

Improved water entitlements are also an important part of the solution. The companion volume ***Truth in Water Entitlements*** outlines the decade of effort that is needed to better define and manage water entitlements. The key is providing security to water entitlements that in most States can currently be reduced at the whim of Ministers and their departments.

People have to trust the system of water entitlements and their management if investment is to occur. Trust will only be won if Governments go back to each river valley and settle the water entitlement issues in an open way with rural communities. If this is done then the settlements in each river valley and water system will sum together to create good outcomes for bigger river basins such as the Murray-Darling.

There will be a water grid emerge over the next century, which will link local water networks both physically and through competition for water resources in catchments. The pipe networks will be fed from dams, bores and river pumps. The creation of this grid will require national commitment and more innovative funding. Development of this water grid must go hand in hand with more recycling of our water and better capture, storage and use of the water falling on urban areas.

We must face the inevitability of more long droughts in future. This, afterall, has been our past. We therefore can either continue as we have in the past or mitigate the effects of drought in the future by better management of water including its harvesting and the building of infrastructure which better uses available surplus water thereby limiting drought. This may include transporting water to nearby towns that are most susceptible to drought and, where necessary, desalinating seawater and brackish water.

It is only through the adoption of all facets of a national water scheme - from the big water schemes that require national commitment, to local schemes that maximise water efficiency - that a common water future for all will be achieved. The Grand Scheme is to be found in many smaller schemes.

***Talking Water*** sets out to stimulate discussion and encourage governments and communities to re-examine the way they think about Australia's water resource, its management and its future direction. The book takes an Australian perspective. Its ideas are the ingredients for a mix of solutions that need to be created and tailored to each major city and rural locality. It outlines the priority areas for immediate action.

Some of the ideas presented here have been evaluated before and been found wanting, been unviable or have been labeled as too expensive. They are being paraded again because they are part of the overall debate that has to occur.

The Farmhand Foundation believes Australia, as a nation, must address the issue of water and that our many branches of government must take leadership in the debate.

In this fourth year of the 21st Century, it is time for our nation to seriously start talking about water and the infrastructure necessary to utilise and save this critical resource.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Mansfield". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

**Bob Mansfield**  
*Chairman,*  
**Farmhand Foundation**

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