

Media Release

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Farmhand Foundation Water Strategy Launch

The Farmhand Foundation today launches the result of major research it commissioned into Australia's water problems. The findings are presented in two reports.

Talking Water addresses the Foundation's commitment, made at its launch in October 2003, to canvass all the schemes put forward over the past century to "solve" Australia's water shortage. This document has been written by independent consultants from Hunter Water in NSW and assesses schemes on the basis of efficiency, environmental impact and cost. The report has undergone peer review. This report is the first comprehensive assessment of these schemes in Australian history.

Truth in Water Entitlements addresses the wider policy issues regarding water management and use in Australia. Dr John Patterson was engaged by the Foundation as an experienced and forthright expert on water management to carry out an independent review of the situation. Dr Patterson wrote the first draft of the report after speaking to key ministers, rural leaders, scientists, environmentalists and public officials in the eastern Australian states. Following his sudden death in February, his colleague Jim Keary, chief executive of Hunter Water, took on responsibility for the task. They have produced a wide-ranging document, which calls for governments to work together to achieve a "gold standard" of water management. The Foundation's goal is to fundamentally change and improve water management in Australia for the long term.

Launching the reports, Farmhand Foundation chairman, Mr Bob Mansfield, said the continuing drought, which still gripped 62 per cent of Australia's agricultural land made the results of this research crucial.

"The truth is that we have plenty of water in this country, it's just that we don't have it where we need it," said Mr Mansfield.

"Australia is the driest inhabited continent on earth yet we use 30 per cent more water per head than OECD averages. Public policy has permitted some of our rivers to be over-allocated leaving little water to flow. In NSW, we have handed out entitlements to more water than there is. It's plain stupidity.

"The solutions are there - we have to act now to fix up this water problem."

Talking Water covers a range of water schemes presented by both ordinary people and experts, in their representations to Farmhand, who were genuinely concerned about water management, said Mr Mansfield.

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"Some of them are relatively simple - such as better use of rainwater and greywater --others are more ambitious such as planting crops for the Australian environment and reducing water loss from dams and irrigation channels," he said.

"It is a reference book about Australia and its water for all Australians to read."

Talking Water contains a five-point plan - the Grand Water Scheme - which outlines what is needed to create a world-class irrigation system in Australia. It calls for a national audit of water and infrastructure; the fixing and rebuilding of our rural water structure; financial backing for farmers to create an irrigation system that will use half the water irrigation currently uses; more recycling of effluent and stormwater in towns and cities and the vision to plan and fund a national water grid. The grid will harvest more water where it falls and move it to where it is needed, linking the country's water networks.

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," said Mr Mansfield.

"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. It is time for our nation to seriously start talking water."

The Foundation has aimed to produce documents that will not just gather dust on library shelves but are people-friendly, will be read and re-read and thus will make a difference. Copies of *Talking Water* have been sent to every MP in federal parliament and every state and territory parliament as well as major libraries and secondary school libraries.

The first objective set by the Farmhand Foundation was to provide immediate relief to families suffering the affects of drought. The appeal raised \$24,640,000 and more than 18,000 families received "helping hand" grants for the basics of day to day living. The Farmhand Appeal has now been closed.

The launch of these two reports signals the second objective set for itself by the Farmhand Foundation. The Foundation will not be wound-up. It will continue to keep a watching brief on Australia's battle against drought and the management of its water resources.

The scale of the Foundation's achievements would not have been possible without the assistance of its partner organisations, other organisations and the tens of thousands of Australians who contributed generously.

Donations, resources and personnel have all been supplied by the six organisations who have been Foundation partners since its inception - Telstra, News Limited, STW Group Limited, PBL and Nine Network Australia, 2GB and VISY.

The Foundation is also grateful to its Platinum Partners - Westpac, Qantas, Australia Post, ACCOR, Westfield, 1824 Aged to Perfection and Pfizer.