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EMBARGO: 5:00 pm

**PRIME MINISTER**

FOR MEDIA

SUNDAY, 22 NOVEMBER, 1981

ELECTORATE TALK

Australia is a sparse, dry continent, and the availability of good water supplies has always been critical to our development. The great water projects of earlier years have been landmarks in our economic progress as a nation. Projects such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme have meant an enormous amount to Australia, and it is plain that demands on our limited water resources will increase in the years ahead.

The Government recently took the historic decision what we must develop a perspective on Australia's total water resource needs right through to the year 2000. Such a perspective will be essential in developing a strategy to meet Australia's water requirements through the 1980's and 1990's. To achieve the necessary perspective, an investigation and study will be undertaken by the Department of National Development and Energy, in collaboration with relevant water authorities and other organisations.

The Government believes we need an updated assessment of all Australian water resources, including underground as well as surface water, in terms of both quality and quantity. We need estimates of current water usage, we need to know the trends in expenditures on water resource development, and we need to examine the implications of future demands.

The investigation will focus on water management issues of national significance. It will consider management strategies to deal with future requirements, and it will set out options to deal with issues and problems that are revealed by the investigation. Funds of quarter of a million dollars will be made available to get the investigation underway this year, and the benefits from this research will obviously be out of all proportion to these costs.

The Commonwealth Government will be contacting the States shortly to outline the concept, and to seek their co-operation. Good water supplies are of basic importance to all Australians, to every Australian family, to every Australian business, to virtually every activity which takes place in this country. The decision by the Government to initiate this investigation, which is obviously an indispensable preliminary to the development of a long term strategy, is a clear demonstration of the Government's determination that water resource problems shall not constrain Australia's development.

As a result of this decision, the community will have available to it information which will give us guidance in water resource development right through to the end of this century, so that we can use our management and planning skills to prevent inadequacies in water supplies from imposing avoidable limitations on the development of Australia.

This initiative on the part of the Commonwealth Government in relation to water resources is obviously very much in harmony with the New River Murray Waters Agreement which was entered into by the three State Governments and the Commonwealth a few weeks ago which will result in effective and co-operative management of the Murray, especially in relation to salinity problems.

Australia's water resources are being examined from a number of viewpoints. The Australian Water Resources Council - a Commonwealth/State forum for co-operation to mutual advantage - is now nearing the completion of a wide-ranging review of water research in Australia. C.S.I.R.O. has recently completed an internal review of its water research programmes, with the objective of providing a more effective and visible focus for its water research effort. We must have an adequate research base to support whatever initiatives are necessary to overcome water resource difficulties.

Throughout most of the 1970's there was quite rightly a particular focus in our national planning on our mineral and energy resources, and up to this point it has been possible to meet the water requirements of these developments at manageable levels even in arid areas. But it is a matter for concern whether we can continue to assume the continued availability of water within the range of costs which has prevailed until the present time. There are already indications of possible conflicts in the use of available water resources, and it will be necessary for us to work our way through to equitable solutions.

While the States are primarily responsible for the development and management of our water supplies and resources, the Commonwealth has made a significant contribution through the National Water Resources Programme. And although this programme has been implemented in the context of our overall Budgetary restraint, over \$220 million will have been provided by the end of this financial year by the Commonwealth and the States together, since 1978/79, and \$110 million of that is Commonwealth funds.

The Government will maintain its commitment in this area of fundamental concern to all Australians, and the perspective to be developed on water resource needs to the year 2000 is a further forward looking initiative on the part of the Government on an issue that is vital to Australia's future.