




Communities in distress: How can the water sector help ease the social strain of drought?

 by [Martin Kovacs](#) — 25/11/2019 in [Engagement](#)



6 min read

Water scarcity is a fixed issue in many regional areas around Australia. Beyond environmental and economic concerns, the impact shortages have on communities can be devastating. Martin Kovacs explores how community engagement can help to alleviate social strain and determine priorities.

Gauging the social effects of water shortages can be difficult due to the sustained nature of drought events. But, as with other extreme weather events, the effects are often far-reaching.

As noted by Emma Austin, a PhD Researcher at the Centre for Water, Climate and Land at the University of Newcastle, drought stands in contrast to other extreme weather events, such as flooding and bushfires, in that it represents a “slow-onset extreme”.

“We know that rapid extremes like floods can have acute and long-term impacts, and many people have long-term mental health problems as a result,” Austin said.

“Less is known about chronic extremes like drought. Personal and social consequences develop as a result of the [unfamiliarity, unpredictability and longevity of drought](#).”

Social sorrow

Exploring the link between drought and wellbeing, and ways people adapt and cope with drought, Austin explained her research has focused on drought-related stress experienced by farmers in New South Wales.

Austin said farmers aged between 18 and 35, who live and worked on their farm, and who are isolated and experience financial hardship, are more likely to experience drought-related stress.

“Community impacts of drought can include people leaving the area, losing businesses and services, and people not getting together as much,” she said.

“Other community impacts can include changes in the countryside, such as the impact of looking out at dry paddocks and not being able to water your garden, along with reduced water quality.”

Austin pointed to the importance of having structures in place to help communities cope and adapt during water shortages, describing planning as essential.

“Policy needs to support [long-term resilience through planning and preparation](#), even in non-drought times. Policy, funding and community initiatives must support ongoing, long-term planning,” she said.

“Community impacts of drought can include people leaving the area [and] losing businesses and services.”

*Emma Austin,
University of
Newcastle*

Community minded


Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC) Councillor and Water and Waste Committee Chair Nancy Sommerfield stressed the importance of keeping communities informed about local government initiatives.



From water security updates to education programs, Sommerfield said engagement provides benefits for both councils and communities.

“We think it is really important to keep the community in the loop about what we are doing,” she said.

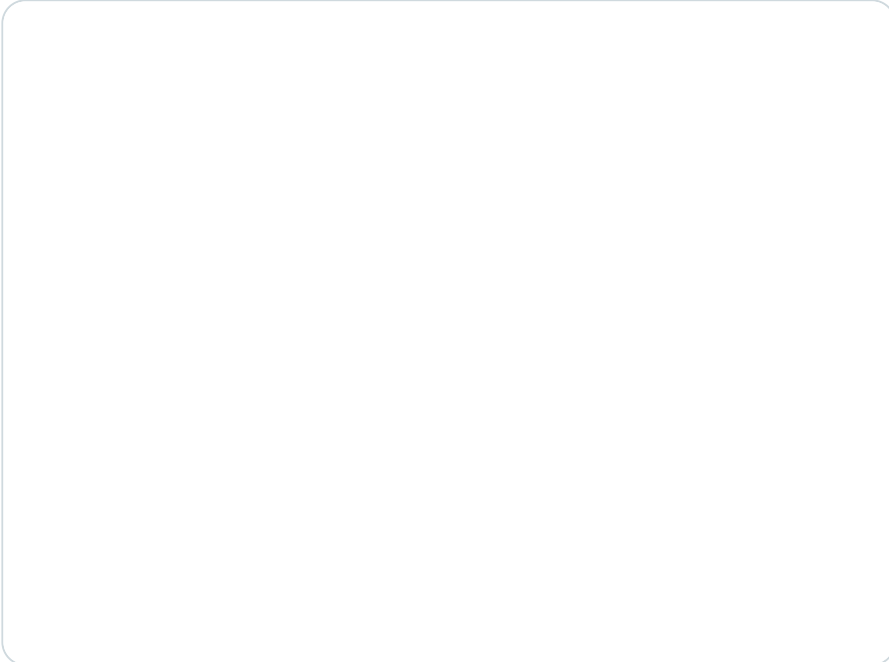
“We’ve carried out a series of educational advertising campaigns via TV, paper, social media and radio to connect with people.


“If you don’t engage with your community, they don’t know what’s going on and don’t make sure they’re careful with their water use.”






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Sommerfield pointed to the social impact of shortages being particularly pronounced in regional areas, and said TRC has undertaken a number of initiatives, including providing rate relief for graziers and farmers, and allowing for limited watering.

“We’re very concerned for the mental status of our people out there, which is why we’ve ensured they’ve still been able to do some watering,” she said.

“It’s important for people to have some greenery around them, and for their social health to continue to garden.”

Amid ongoing concern about water security, Sommerfield highlighted the importance of preparing for future drought conditions, and said [community engagement is an important component](#) of this process.

“It means that you’re taking people on the same journey. [It means] everybody understands what’s going on, as there’s nothing worse than being kept in the dark,” she said.

Utilities to the rescue

Queensland’s Seqwater has looked to the past in planning for the future, with Corporate and Community Relations Manager Sophie Walker noting the utility does not have to go too far back to draw on lessons learnt from the Millennium Drought.

Walker pointed to the importance of working with local councils and communities, and highlighted the role of engagement in Seqwater’s Water Security Program, which aims to secure potable water for south-east Queensland over the next 30 years.

“Communities can become understandably anxious when there is media coverage or public discussion about water shortages and drought,” Walker said.

“As the regional bulk-water supplier, it’s important for Seqwater to provide communities with the latest information on supply levels and drought mitigation measures, so they are aware and can respond accordingly.”

“If you don’t engage with your community, they don’t know what’s going on and don’t make sure they’re careful with their water use.”

*TRC Councillor
Nancy Sommerfield*

Seqwater issues a weekly security and consumption update, and also regularly briefs councils and other local stakeholders on its adaptive drought response approach.

As part of its community messaging, Walker said Seqwater utilises a range of [traditional and digital media platforms](#), and works closely with its water service provider partners and their shareholding councils.

“Research has shown that community members often look first to local councils for water supply information,” she said.

“As a consequence, a partnered approach between Seqwater and local councils helps ensure community members receive more consistent messages about dam levels, drought response measures and water efficiency.”

Cross-jurisdictional coordination

Monash University Emeritus Professor Barry Hart highlighted the importance of a coordinated approach to cross-jurisdictional water management, from a local level through to state and federal ranks.

Hart noted that, depending upon the nature of the decisions being made, regional engagement can allow communities to play a role in the wider process and help harness local insights.

“Any agency developing a new water policy or strategy will need to undertake huge amounts of collaboration. Not only is the decision-maker, the politician, in a better position to know that all views have hopefully been taken into account, but also that the agency has made better use of expertise and knowledge at a range of levels,” he said.

The process of environmental watering is an example of the overarching coordination required. In Victoria, this is overseen by the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH).

VEWH interacts at a federal level with the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, with its counterparts at a state level.

“Communities, local governments, irrigation organisations and environmental groups all have to be part of the conversation.”

Barry Hart, Monash University

“This is where communities, local governments, irrigation organisations and environmental groups all have to be part of the conversation,” Hart said.

“This is almost a new-rule society, and the community has to be involved in these discussions, no question.”

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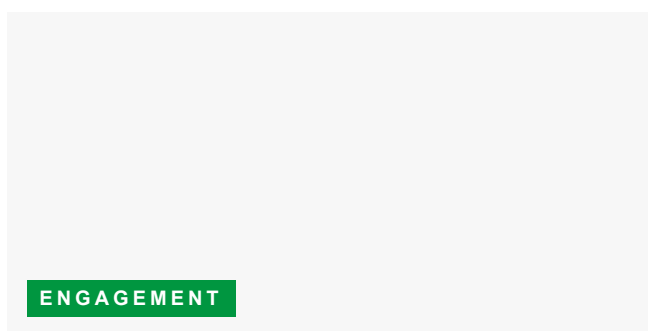
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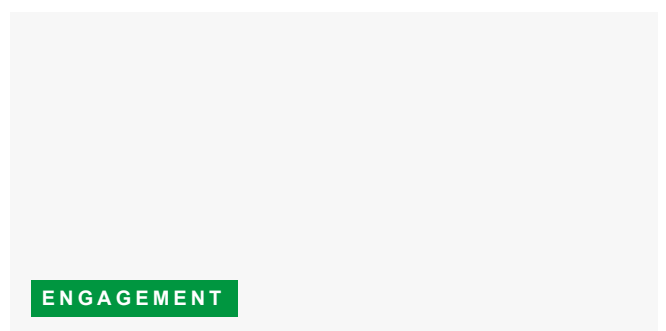
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