

# Xenophon pursues an integrated approach to stormwater

Nick Xenophon, Independent Senator for SA

## Key points

- December's heavy rains reminded us all of how much of Adelaide's rainwater runs straight out to sea.
- Nick Xenophon continues his advocacy for better stormwater harvesting in South Australia.
- He believes that better harvesting can reduce our reliance on the ailing River Murray.
- While there are many good initiatives proposed or underway, Nick believes that there needs to be a more integrated approach at national, state and local levels.
- In the Senate, he has called on the Government to provide federal leadership to get the best out of Adelaide's stormwater.

## Senate Hansard

**Senator XENOPHON** (South Australia) (18/9/2008, 2:38 PM) — My question is to Senator Faulkner, the Minister representing the Minister for Climate Change and Water. The Salisbury council in South Australia is a national and world leader in stormwater harvesting, with the architect of their scheme, Colin Pitman, estimating that, if the existing local scheme is expanded, some 80 gigalitres of Adelaide's stormwater can be harvested at an infrastructure cost of some \$350 million, about one quarter of the cost of Adelaide's proposed 50-gigalitre desalination plant. Does the minister agree that stormwater harvesting is a much cheaper and much less energy intensive method of delivering clean water than a desalination plant?

**Senator FAULKNER** (New South Wales) (Special Minister of State and Cabinet Secretary) — I thank Senator Xenophon for his question on this important issue. At the heart of the government's approach to water policy is the recognition that climate change means reduced rainfall. The \$12.9 billion Water for the Future plan, the \$1 billion National Urban Water and Desalination Plan and the \$250 million National Water Security Plan for Towns and Cities will help secure new water supplies for households and businesses. I am advised that the \$250 million National Rainwater and Greywater Initiative will also deliver on the key priority of using water wisely. These programs will help deal with the impacts of climate change and reduce our reliance on rainfall.

I am advised that several specific stormwater harvesting projects are underway in Adelaide, receiving almost \$53 million in Commonwealth funding. They include Waterproofing Northern Adelaide, Waterproofing the South and the metropolitan major irrigators stormwater reuse project. I understand that these projects also involve water-recycling activities. Combined, these projects have the capacity to harvest up to 17 gigalitres of stormwater per year and they will be operating by 2011.

The federal government has also committed \$6.55 million in funding for the Salisbury stormwater harvesting project under the National Water Security Plan for Towns and Cities. That project will have the capacity to harvest up to 6.3 gigalitres. That project will be operating, I understand, by 2012. As part of the \$1 billion fund, we are establishing a \$20 million Centre of Excellence in Water Recycling. I think that is to be sited in Brisbane. The centre of excellence will enhance Australia's research and development capacity in recycling and stormwater.

Under the Raising National Water Standards Program, there is an \$800,000 project underway to help decision makers assess the suitability and viability of the aquifer storage and recharge. The federal government, along with state and territory governments, has released water-recycling guidelines so that project planners can match water quality to intended uses in the safest and most cost-effective manner. In terms of the important issue of cost benefits of desalination versus stormwater, the advice I have received is that the cost benefits of different technologies vary on a project-to-project basis. In other words, while recycling might be a good option for one city, it might not work for others. I understand that the situation is the same for desalination and stormwater. (*Time expired*)

**Senator XENOPHON** (South Australia) — Mr President, I ask a supplementary question. Does the minister agree that \$250 million for rainwater recycling nationally is not adequate given the highly cost-effective potential of stormwater harvesting and the urgency of Adelaide weaning itself off reliance on the Murray River?

**Senator FAULKNER** (New South Wales) (Special Minister of State and Cabinet Secretary) — I thank Senator Xenophon for his supplementary question. I can say to Senator Xenophon that Water for the Future has a key focus on securing new water supplies for cities and towns, as I said, in the context of climate

change. This of course requires diversifying our water supplies, with stormwater, recycling and desalination all playing an important role.

**Senator XENOPHON** (South Australia) (18/9/2008, 3:33 PM) — The issue of stormwater harvesting is vital to supplying the future water needs of Adelaide. As we all know, the Murray-Darling crisis is arguably the greatest environmental challenge this nation has ever faced. The Coorong, an internationally listed environmental site, is being choked. The Lower Lakes, the lungs of the Murray, are gasping their last breath. This once great river, a lifeline to so many communities, is dying. It has been estimated that by 2020 Adelaide's drinking water will exceed WHO guidelines for salinity on two days out of five if nothing is done to control salinity in the River Murray.

Currently, in an average year, the City of Adelaide depends on the River Murray for approximately 80 gigalitres of water. By contrast, the combined stormwater discharge of the Adelaide metropolitan area is approximately 80 gigalitres of the 170 gigalitres that are released into the ocean each year. I believe that this provides considerable opportunity for the use of stormwater, through aquifer storage and recovery technology, ASR, to relieve the demand for water from other sources. While the South Australian government is proposing a desalination plant that will produce 50 gigalitres a year at a cost of around \$1.1 billion—and I note that there is a significant Commonwealth contribution for that—I believe that stormwater recycling will result in much greater gains for about a quarter of the cost. I do not suggest in any way that we should not have a desalination plant—I agree with Senator Faulkner that it is important to have that as a backup—but why aren't we pursuing something that is as cost effective, as energy effective, as stormwater recycling? In that regard, I acknowledge the long-term support of the Greens with their advocacy for stormwater recycling.

The challenge, Mr Deputy President, is leadership. What Adelaide requires is leadership from the federal government to provide funding through local-state-federal government partnerships to develop a whole-of-Adelaide approach to stormwater recycling. I note that there are already two initiatives, started by the Howard government and continued by the current government, that are contributing to stormwater recycling in Adelaide. Senator Faulkner noted that the Waterproofing Northern Adelaide project, at a cost of \$38 million, will be recycling 18 gigalitres of stormwater per annum by 2010. Meanwhile the Waterproofing Southern Adelaide project, at a cost of around \$10 million, is similarly making contributions to stormwater recycling in and around the Onkaparinga River. However, there are so many more opportunities that need to be embraced through a joint local-state-federal government process. In the City of Marion, by using the airport site, a further 16 gigalitres of stormwater could be harvested. In the City of Wakefield, around the Gawler River, a further 20 gigalitres of water could be captured, recycled and injected into aquifers to offset the use of Murray water in the northern Adelaide plains.

In addition, there are numerous smaller projects in the range of one to two gigalitres, including along Port Road and the Cheltenham racecourse in the City of Sturt, that could be made possible if leadership were provided, funding made available, and an integrated strategy developed. And can I say about the Cheltenham racecourse site that I fundamentally disagree with the state government's approach of using that area for housing when it could be used for recycling stormwater. With these opportunities in mind, I believe it is vital for the government to take steps to develop such joint initiatives for stormwater harvesting across the whole of Adelaide. It is this belief that was behind my question without notice and, while I thank the minister for his answer, I believe that much more can be done. We need federal leadership in stormwater harvesting just as we need federal leadership in saving the Murray. If we leave it just to the states, we see responses like the one from the Victorian government to the Murray crisis, which is to build a north-south pipeline that will take out a further 110 gigalitres of water and divert it to the City of Melbourne. Many would say that that is an act of environmental vandalism.

Alternatively we see state governments trying to spend big on energy-hungry projects such as desalination instead of harvesting what already runs down our streets. Metropolitan Adelaide and its plains have many sites with the unique alignment of watercourses to source water, aquifers to recharge and an ocean to discharge. It is the ideal site for strategic stormwater harvesting. In fact, Colin Pitman of the Salisbury council is acknowledged as a world leader. He is a hero when it comes to doing the right thing by harvesting our stormwater and we need to take heed of what he is doing and to expand that substantially. It is my hope that in the future the government will have made more progress in relation to the urgent need for funding and leadership for stormwater harvesting and, as a consequence, the minister's answers will provide more hope for the River Murray and for the citizens of Adelaide.

#### **A note from Nick...**

*Thanks for taking the time to read this extract. If you have the time, I'd appreciate it if you were willing to share your thoughts on ways to ensure better stormwater harvesting in the future.*

*You can do this either by calling me: 08 82321144 or by email: [Senator.Xenophon@aph.gov.au](mailto:Senator.Xenophon@aph.gov.au)*