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**8AL ABC**

**Monday, 24 October 2005**

**Alice Springs**

**09:14**

**Morning Show**

**Compere: Kate Sieper**

**Interviewees: Speaker One, Speaker Two and John Childs, Regional Manager, Natural Resource, Policy and Planning**

**Compere**

And down came the rain on Saturday afternoon. In fact, it almost drowned out the sound of the first public forum on the Alice Springs Water Plan. A water plan, in which you are being asked how you want the town water divvied up. Alice Springs has limited water supply. No matter how much it rains, it won't refill the aquifer we use for our drinking water. Eventually, be it fifty years from now, a hundred years, two hundred, eventually the aquifer will run out. So how much should we have? How much should we save for the environment, for agriculture, for industry, and it's a question that you're being asked at the moment as they devise the Alice Springs Water Strategy.

**Speaker One**

My question is not so much the amount of water we've got left, but the cost of getting it out, because my understanding is that because our water has to be pumped out, we rely on the marine field, and I may be wrong on this, but I believe the marine field has got about ten years life left in it. If that's the case – or when it does run out, and I don't think it's all that long off, what is going to pay the power, because we're going to have to pay diesel costs, because the cost of getting water out is about to become astronomical within about ten years. We're not talking about fifty or a hundred years; we're talking about ten. The water – we've got water for about a hundred or so years, but I'm concerned about the cost of getting it out.

I don't believe we've got that because I think it will become uneconomic in about ten years.

**Speaker Two**

Probably the critical question I've got here in terms of what is been said to be the full resource of water available to Alice Springs, how much is it actually going to cost over time to extract that water? Because we're pulling water from the closest part – the closest point to Alice Springs at the moment, but as that water gets further and further away or deeper and deeper, it's going to become costlier and costlier, and at what point do business people in Alice Springs say well – or residents, say we're just not going to pay that price any more, we're going to go somewhere else to – to invest our money or to live our lives.

**Compere**

So you don't think we've got even as long as they're suggesting?

**Speaker Two**

I think there's a lot of water there – there's no doubt there's a lot of water there, but is it viable to extract that water and keep Alice Springs as a viable economy?

**Compere**

Do you think you'll have that question answered?

**Speaker Two**

Not from what we've heard today.

**John Childs**

Giddy, I'm John Childs. I'm the Regional Manager for Natural Resource, Policy and Planning. I guess today is a part of an attempt to understand the water resources available to the people of Alice Springs and to plan properly for their longevity and proper use into the long term future, and today is all about making sure that everyone in the community who wants, has the

opportunity to understand and have input to and have an opinion about the way we should use our water resources into the future.

**Compere**

Alice Springs water comes from Papua New Guinea – this is a new one to me. I didn't know that people would believe that. Can you explain to me the history of that rumor?

**John Childs**

It's a myth. It seems to be put about by tour guides. I imagine it came from a very early tour guide. Probably riding a camel, who heard it from someone and has since – passed it down through generations of tour guides and it persists, but it's a myth. The – originally when the Telegraph Station was set up, the reason it was there was that the river had a small water hole in it. If that was all the water available, Alice Springs could never have grown as big as it is today. Luckily, five kilometers further south where the town is now, there was a larger aquifer underneath the Todd River. Not large enough to supply us today, but big enough for the town up until the early sixties. In the early sixties there were in fact dramatic water restrictions in Alice Springs, because that smaller aquifer could no longer supply the growing town, and the hydro geologists and engineers, again, very fortunately for Alice Springs, found fifteen kilometers further south, we sit on the fringe of a huge regional water resource, and that's what we've been spending a lot of time today understanding, and that very large regional water resource has some better quality water in it, that we are now coming to understand the limits to, so that we can make sure that we use it – don't use it in a way that precludes future very long term sustainability for the Alice.

Is it a bit of fear mongering though about the prospect of future agriculture? Because the numbers and figures that people are looking at, they're thinking, wow we're running out of drinking water and they're proposing agriculture? I mean that seems to be one of the messages coming from the meeting and there isn't really very many agriculture representatives here to put their side of things?

**John Childs**

The proposals for agriculture are at this stage, just that, proposals. They are quite modest and at the outside, our planning looks at the usage – total maximum usage for agriculture of about half of what we're currently using for drinking water in Alice now, but the interesting thing is that we've divided the water up into the really good quality water, and the not so good quality water, and we're looking at confining agriculture to the not so good quality water and reserving almost exclusively, the best quality water for future drinking water supplies. So that's the proposal, but it's certainly out there as a proposal. It's not fate a complied, and it's one of the reasons we're coming to the community generally, industry particularly, and asking for their opinion and feedback on that.

**Compere**

When we say that at one point five percent growth we've got a hundred years left, are we only talking about best quality drinking water though?

**John Childs**

Yes, that's right. If we look at the entire pool of acceptable water that's okay for drinking and suitable for agriculture, then the number is something more like two hundred and fifty years into the future, with a very large population, and by that time, the agricultural component of say, five thousand mega litres, becomes a tiny proportion of that big growth.

**Compere**

Tell me, when we are looking at this drop in the basin, does that mean there are already impacts being felt on the environment?

**John Childs**

Luckily, the very deep ground water out at Rowe Creek, before we started pumping was already ninety metres below ground, and that's far too deep for plant roots to use that water, so our draw down of it, as far as we've been able to determine, doesn't affect any eco system. The interesting thing to me was today people were asking questions about economics, and they were saying, well perhaps the real constraint on our use wont be how much is under the ground, perhaps it'll be the price of getting it out, and the price of supplying it to people, making it frugality a more common approach to water in Alice Springs. So that's a very interesting perspective. I think the key questions will be firstly around whether we reserve just the good quality water for future public water supply, or whether we believe we need to reserve the poorer quality water in that acceptable to poor range for future drinking supply; that's a key question, and the answer to it depends in many ways on our scenarios and beliefs about future growth in both the population, but more especially about growth and water use. The second one I think is around – is a more philosophical question of how much is it right to use water in an arid environment when we are depleting the water faster than it recharges, and that's very much a question for the community.

**Speaker Three**

I've got two questions. One is to mainly make sure that we're working with the best data available and that's clear of any shadow of vested interest or bias and that sort of thing, so I'd like to see independent reviews on the data

that we're getting and how we continue that process, and I guess the second this is, challenging this whole assumption that sustainable equals a hundred years of supply and we really have to get outside of this eighty/twenty rule and work towards only mining or extracting the water that we can actually recharge. So I think that assumption of a hundred year – using eighty percent of the supply is totally unfounded.

**Speaker Four**

I'm interested in what is going to happen to the eco systems with this drop in water table. Does it have an affect on our natural vegetation? Also our water quality, as it diminishes in level, does it affect our quality of water that we're going to be receiving?

**Compere**

Do you think though when they say the eighty/twenty rule that in a hundred years we can use eighty percent of the basin sustainably, that they're saying that we can use eighty percent of the basin over a hundred years and it wont be affecting the environment, it wont be having any negative impact on the eco system, that that is what the eighty/twenty rule means?

**Speaker Four**

Well I think they've just put that rule forward for the time being and they've thrown it out there to see what people – how they're going to respond to that. I mean it's clear that this water resource is not renewable and it's going to run out eventually, so I think they're just trying to mediate how much we use. I think I'd like to see perhaps some more emphasis on how we can reduce our usage instead of talking about this increase in consumption, how can we reduce it?

**Compere**

Will you believe them? I mean how confident are you that

they're getting their science right here, about a) how much water there is; b) what happens when we take our water out; and c) I guess also how much water's recharging?

**Speaker Five**

I do have a lot of confidence in their science in that we are being given the best fact – or best information that we can be. So I'm happy to make decisions based on the information that they've given us.

**Speaker Six**

You know, you put a lot of trust in these people. They are the people who are informing this whole process, so hopefully they are telling us what's right.

**Compere**

This strategy's all about I guess, Alice locals deciding what are the most beneficial ways in using a limited resource. What do you think is the best way we use this water?

**Speaker Seven**

I think that we really need to consider that water is a luxury and we can't – have to use it as such, and we can't – we can't just use it for aesthetics and we need to be really careful about what sort of agriculture and horticulture we have in the area.

**Speaker Eight**

We aren't in danger of running out of this water immediately, and I think restrictions may be in fact a little harsh to just throw restrictions on people, you know bang, you can't do this, but educate the people, put the responsibility onto them to actually consider what they're doing, you know, and save it for the future.

**Compere**

Some of the people who turned up to the Water Forum – the Public Forum on the Future of the Alice Springs Water Supply on Saturday. You can have your say next week as

well. Take a look at the strategy. It's at  
alicewaterplan.nt.gov.au – that's alicewaterplan.nt.gov.au  
and then of course you can also get along next Saturday at  
one thirty pm at Witchety's where you get to decide how  
our water is divvied up.

**ENDS**

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