



December 2021

Water Security for Remote Communities in SA

Background

Water is a basic human right and is essential for social, economic, health and cultural wellbeing. In South Australia, there are some under-served communities, particularly in regional and remote areas, without reliable access to safe and affordable drinking water.¹ These communities face specific issues and challenges when it comes to the provision of water services, including small economies of scale, poor quality water sources, ageing infrastructure, and high operating costs.²

Fragmented arrangements for service delivery in remote and regional water services contribute to policy inconsistencies, leaving some under-served communities with poor (sometimes unsafe), unreliable and high-cost water services.³ While SA Water provides drinking water for a large majority of the state, approximately 4000 people are serviced by a mix of local councils, private providers or have developed a self-sufficient supply structure ('self-supplied communities'). Significantly, this includes Aboriginal people living in remote communities who already have poor health outcomes, exacerbated by a lack of access to safe and secure water.

The SA Government's state-wide pricing policy means that most customers pay the same price per kilolitre of water in all metropolitan and regional areas in the SA Water network. However, while the provision exists for the State Government to extend this policy to small providers, it currently does not – meaning that communities reliant on other providers are often either paying more than the state-wide price for water or are receiving substandard services. Coober Pedy is a well-known example, with residents paying up to 5 times more for water compared to SA Water customers.⁴

¹ SACOSS (2020) [Scoping Study on Water Issues in Remote Aboriginal Communities](#), Adelaide.

² Productivity Commission (2021) [National Water Reform 2020, Draft Report](#), Canberra; Willis et al (2015) [Water supply and governance options for outback towns in remote South Australia](#), Goyder Institute for Water Research Technical Report Series No. 15/7, Adelaide.

³ Aither (2021) [Falling through the gaps: A practical approach to improving drinking water services for regional and remote communities in South Australia](#)

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-06/coober-pedy-water-supply-concerns-opal-capital/10867894>

Policy Response

The State Government has committed to undertaking a water security audit for 'self-supplied' remote communities.⁵ This is a welcome starting point to better understand existing water supply arrangements, short and long-term risks, as well as potential investment options to secure water into the future. However, not all communities are included in this audit and a **comprehensive state-wide stocktake** of South Australian regional and remote communities water services is needed to gain a holistic understanding of the state of play, systemic challenges, and the level of investment required to address the issues in a co-ordinated and strategic manner.

Similarly, SACOSS welcomes the State Government's commitment to developing a **standard for a basic level of safe and reliable drinking water** for self-supplied remote communities by 2022, as part of the state's Implementation Plan for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.⁶ The development of a *basic level of service* would enable conversations between communities, government and service providers about how basic water needs can be met under all circumstances (drought and 'normal' times). However, such a basic level of service needs to be applied across all regional and remote communities in South Australia, not just those which are self-supplied. Without a state-wide approach, there is the risk of further fragmenting decision making and deepening inequities based on differing governance arrangements.

Finally, noting that upgrading water infrastructure and the associated planning takes time, there is a need for the State Government to commit to interim measures to deliver clean and safe water to communities in need (e.g. subsidising bottled water, water carting, and other non-network solutions). This will ensure that no further negative health impacts occur from poor quality water.

SACOSS Proposal

SACOSS seeks commitment from all parties that, in the next term of government, concrete steps are taken to fix drinking water supply to regional and remote South Australia to:

1. **Extend the scope of the planned water security stocktake of self-supplied remote communities** to *all* remote communities, both inside and outside of SA Water's network.
2. Develop a **policy that outlines a basic level of service** that the Government commits to not falling below (basic level of service), and apply to *all* remote communities, both inside and outside of SA Water's network.
3. Work with communities to undertake water security planning in regional and remote communities.
4. **Extend the application of the Community Service Obligations (CSOs)** to all residential drinking water service providers.
5. Commit to **interim measures** to deliver clean and safe water to communities in need, until such time as sustainable access to safe water is established.

⁵ Government of South Australia (2021) [Draft Water Security Statement 2021: Water for Sustainable Growth](#), p. 31

⁶ Government of South Australia (2021) [South Australia's Implementation Plan for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#), p. 71