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Dear Dr Kingsborough,

“Water for Life and Human Health”: Joint Community Submission to the Government of South Australia’s draft Water Security Statement 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Government of South Australia’s draft Water Security Statement 2021. We are writing as a coalition of organisations concerned about the lack of access to safe, affordable and secure water for some South Australians.

Water is a fundamental human right and is essential for health, hygiene and life. Lack of access to clean and secure drinking water has been linked to significant health impacts including hygiene-related skin, ear, and eye infections, respiratory infections and diarrhoeal disease¹. Repeated infections have also been linked with increased risk for long-term diseases including chronic kidney disease, rheumatic heart disease and renal failure.²

Given the high levels of water security for the overwhelming majority of the State’s population, it is simply unconscionable that some members of our community do not have access to safe drinking water. Notably, those living in rural and remote areas, particularly in remote Aboriginal communities and homelands, already face a higher burden of disease and poorer health outcomes, compared to those living in major cities.³ In the context of South Australia’s commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, provision of safe and secure water is critical to advancing targets around long and healthy lives.⁴

No South Australian should be left behind when it comes to access to drinking water. However, there is currently a lack of policy and leadership imperative in taking a holistic approach to fixing these issues. While we welcome the inclusion of remote community water security as one of the draft Water Security Statement’s ten strategic actions as a positive step, more could and should be done.

¹ Knibbs and Sly (2014) [Indigenous health and environmental risk factors: an Australian problem with global analogues?](#) Global Health Action

² Hall et al. (2020) [Housing, crowding and hygiene-related infectious diseases in the Barkly region NT](#), University of Queensland, Northern Territory – for the Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) [Rural & remote health](#)

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia (2020) [Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes](#)

The draft Statement's strategic action to "***further investigate the case for additional water security investments in self-supplied remote communities and continue to support the provision of potable supplies for critical human water needs in exceptional circumstances, where such communities have identified risks to existing supplies***"⁵ should be reframed as a more ambitious vision to set up long-term, sustainable outcomes for regional and remote communities, rather than dealing with issues reactively as they arise.

The draft Water Security Statement flags work to be undertaken by the Department of Environment and Water (DEW) to complete a water security audit and risk assessment for self-supplied remote communities. This will involve "confirming the existing water supply arrangements to assess short and long-term risks, better understand future requirements, and identifying investment options to address potential water shortages".⁶ This is a promising starting point; however, the stocktake needs to be adequately resourced and take the whole of the state into account.

While our joint submission is in response to the South Australian context, we are aware of similar issues in other jurisdictions.⁷ The West Australian Auditor General recently reported improved outcomes for the management of essential services to remote communities in Western Australia since a 2015 audit, when 80 per cent of communities tested failed to meet Australian drinking water standards, with elevated levels of contaminants such as nitrates, uranium, *E. coli* and Naegleria. In South Australia, we are not confident that we have the same baseline to work from to make informed decisions, identify priorities and target improvements.

To this end, we are calling for:

- Acknowledgement of the social, community and human rights imperatives of water security planning when considering 'Water for Sustainable Growth'.
- The Water Security Statement to take a more **ambitious and proactive leadership position** in addressing drinking water supply challenges for regional and remote South Australia. This includes articulating a clear vision to ensure that *all* South Australians have access to safe water, setting up frameworks for working towards that vision, clarity around roles and responsibilities, and committing to monitoring and evaluating progress against levels of service. Without this leadership, there is a missed opportunity for genuine transformative change.
- Investment to **extend the scope of the planned stocktake** of select self-supplied communities to gain a state-wide understanding of water service arrangements for regional and remote communities, both inside and outside of SA Water's network.
- The government to **commit to developing a basic level of service** for all South Australians. This would enable conversation between communities, government and service providers about how basic water needs can be met under all circumstances (drought and 'normal' times). Critically, setting a minimum bar which the state government agrees to not fall below provides a clear direction for long-term decision-making and policy decisions.

⁵ Government of South Australia (2021) [Draft Water Security Statement 2021: Water for Sustainable Growth](#), p. 46

⁶ Government of South Australia (2021) [Draft Water Security Statement 2021: Water for Sustainable Growth](#), p. 31

⁷Office of the Auditor General Western Australia (2021) [Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities – Follow-up](#)

The draft Water Security Statement provides an unprecedented opportunity to take a leadership position and fix long standing issues with access to safe drinking water in South Australia. A strategy targeting 'Water for Sustainable Growth' cannot continue to leave behind those without the basics. Whilst long-term solutions are being developed and deployed, short- and medium-term relief is fundamental. We strongly urge the Government to ensure that until such time as sustainable access to safe water is established, clean and safe water be delivered to communities in need. This will ensure that no further negative health impacts occur in our most vulnerable communities from poor quality water. We are looking forward to working with the government to progress meaningful action in this space.

Sincerely the undersigned,

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