

18 October 2016

Mr Rob Hansen  
Research Director  
Agriculture and Environment Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Via email: [aec@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:aec@parliament.qld.gov.au)

Dear Mr Hansen

**Submission to the Inquiry into the  
Auditor General's Report 16 - 2015-16: *Flood resilience of river catchments***

The Council of Mayors (SEQ) welcomes this opportunity to provide input to the inquiry into the Auditor General's Report 16 - 2015-16 *Flood resilience of river catchments*.

The Council of Mayors (SEQ) is the independent local government advocacy organisation for the one in seven Australians and two thirds of Queenslanders living in South East Queensland (SEQ). Our Directors are the 11 Mayors of the region elected by the community of SEQ.

SEQ's relationship with its waterways is unique in the Australian context. SEQ is the only major Australian settlement built substantially on floodplains. The topography of the region has resulted in 19 relatively short catchments flowing from the nearby Great Dividing Range into the internationally recognised Moreton Bay and beaches. The region's open catchments support urban and economic growth through drinking and other water supplies, high-quality agricultural production, globally renowned tourism and leisure facilities, scenic amenity, and world-class fisheries. Brisbane, with its key infrastructure facilities, is the only major Australian city located on a large, mature river subject to regular and severe flooding.

Australia's fastest growing urban region is also the region most directly influenced by its catchments. The capacity of SEQ to continue to grow its population, its economy and employment, and its continued capacity to deliver more than its share to Australian economic growth, is directly linked to the capacity of its waterways to support this growth and maintain the quality of life for which the region is renowned. In short, the future growth of Australia's most vital growth region will be determined by the decisions being made now, at all three levels of government, about our catchments.

The last decade has been one of climatic extremes for SEQ. The record drought years followed by devastating floods have highlighted the importance of enhancing the climate resilience of the region's waterways and water security in SEQ. The communities of SEQ are at this point in time very aware that they "live in a catchment".

The economic and social impacts of droughts and floods have been highly significant in SEQ. The drought years saw the community reduce its consumption to 140 litres per day. The restructure of the SEQ industry included the transfer of \$2.6 billion assets from local

councils to the state and the construction of a further \$6 billion in infrastructure to secure supply.

The floods of 2011 and 2013 have been costly in terms of lives and infrastructure. The reconstruction costs for SEQ were \$700m in 2011 and \$300m in 2013. In the 2013 storm event, the production of water from the main water treatment facility for Brisbane was significantly impacted for three days by a huge slug of silt from the upstream lands as a result of severe erosion which also affected large areas of highly productive farming lands in the Lockyer Valley.

Sediment has also begun to affect the Port of Brisbane with costly and on-going de-silting operations underway. SEQ fisheries valued at \$157m (2009) have been adversely affected by coastal algal blooms and the loss of seagrass associated with sedimentation and nutrient pollution. There are 12.4 million annual visits to Moreton Bay Marine Park, making it Queensland's most popular park.

In addition, upgrading the vital infrastructure provided by water utilities as the region's population grows is an ongoing cost to the community. \$100m is spent annually through wastewater treatment plant upgrades to reduce nutrients entering the region's waterways. Cost effective solutions and partnerships that contribute to water quality improvement in the catchments are actively being sought by these entities including a recent nutrient trading example established by Queensland Urban Utilities on the Logan River for the Beaudesert Waste Water Treatment Plant which will result in savings to customers.

Seqwater in its submission to the Queensland Competition Authority on 31 July 2014, indicated a potential spend on natural assets of the region's catchments of \$115m over 15 years, with 11 project and programs of forecast expenditure greater than \$2m. Seqwater is keen to value-add to this investment with other parties, including Councils.

SEQ has large numbers of infill development and a number of key greenfield development areas, including those within the Pumicestone, Logan and Bremer catchments. Sediment movement from these areas into the waterways is an issue that involves developers, the building industry, site engineers, councils and the State Government. Prevention of soil movement will achieve significant results.

Security of our clean drinking water, healthy productive farming lands, recreation and cultural values of our riverine systems, the tourism icon of Moreton Bay and its seagrass pastures and internationally listed Ramsar wetlands as well as the Gold Coast Broadwater and Pumicestone Passage, and infrastructure such as the port, roads, bridges and pipes is the ultimate objective. The cost of repairs and inefficient systems are being worn by our community. It is beyond time for a cohesive vision, plan and actions for climate resilience in SEQ.

Whilst there has been significant effort on water quality improvement projects in SEQ waterways over the past 20 years, these have often been uncoordinated. Each year, funds are spent on projects across local and state government, water utilities and community groups, to improve waterway health and resilience. Unfortunately, these efforts are often not understood or communicated, and opportunities for alignment and better coordination have been missed in the past. The lack of coordination also means that investments are not necessarily directed towards the highest priority areas where the outcomes can be maximised.

There is clear evidence that a whole of catchment approach is needed to fully integrate the economic, environmental and social aspects of waterway management in SEQ. In this context, a 'business as usual' approach to the management of the region's waterways is no longer acceptable. The region is growing, it is densely populated and there are numerous agencies and jurisdictions with roles in various parts of the catchment management puzzle. The coordination of effort and resources now requires immediate attention.

This new approach will ensure more coordinated catchment management and will deliver optimised outcomes. The solution is a focus on on-ground activities that deliver tangible benefits to our waterways, economy and the region's resilience, water security and health and wellbeing. Where efforts to coordinate catchment management in an area are underway (for example, the Pumicestone Passage) these will form an important base for future work.

In early 2014, a high level agreement initiated by the Council of Mayors (SEQ) was established between the key local government and non-government groups with an interest in water and catchment management in South East Queensland. The signatory organisations are:

- Council of Mayors (SEQ)
- Seqwater
- Healthy Waterways Ltd / SEQ Catchments Ltd  
(now merged as Healthy Waterways and Catchments)
- Queensland Urban Utilities
- Unitywater.

The signatory organisations agreed that:

1. *An integrated approach to the management of the catchments of South East Queensland is vital to ensuring the future economic, social and environmental health of the South East Queensland region.*
2. *By working together, more efficient management and funding arrangements will result.*
3. *In principle, both a long term strategy and short term implementation plan will be developed.*
4. *This agreement will form the basis of discussions with the State Government with the view to fully align the government and non-government approaches.*

Since then, the signatories have progressed coordinated catchment management under the brand of *Resilient Rivers Initiative* to put detail to the high level agreement (further detail is available at [www.seqmayors.qld.gov.au](http://www.seqmayors.qld.gov.au) ).

The Resilient Rivers Initiative is at its core an integrated catchment management approach. Its vision and goals recognise that a balanced consideration of water quantity, water quality and water supply issues is fundamental to the long term liveability and productivity of the region. One of the goals of the Initiative is "to improve the climate resilience of our region".

The Resilient Rivers Taskforce (made up of the Mayors plus Queensland Ministerial representatives) has been established to guide this approach until a formalised and agreed structure can take on this important role which is lacking within the current governance arrangements.

The Auditor General's report makes mention of the Resilient Rivers Initiative and offers the following comment (at page 25):

*The catchment action plans are not floodplain management plans. The goals do not specifically include floodplain management, although flooding to some extent impacts on, and is influenced by, these factors.*

The two Catchment Action Plans completed to date as part of the Resilient Rivers Initiative are based on the Lockyer and Mid Brisbane catchments. At the time of their preparation the Brisbane River Catchment Flood Studies activity was focused on flood modelling and there was insufficient information to fully incorporate floodplain management into the plans. The Catchment Action Plans reference this lack of information for consideration in the review process.

There is an opportunity with the planned preparation of the Bremer River Catchment Action Plan and the Lower Brisbane/Redlands Catchment Action Plan during 2017 to incorporate floodplain management plans that are currently being coordinated by the Queensland Reconstruction Authority.

However, the fundamental integration factor is still missing.

The Auditor General's report refers to integrated catchment management at page 16:

*Flood risk management is an element of integrated catchment management.*

*Integrated catchment management involves recognising and balancing the relationships in factors impacting on the complex ecosystems within a catchment. It acknowledges that it is often not possible to adjust one factor without affecting another.*

*An example would be the effect of increased urbanised development. The increase in impervious surfaces such as roads and buildings increases the amount of runoff due to the reduced absorption properties of these surfaces.*

*Similarly, the shutting down of the water treatment plant at Mount Crosby in January 2013, due to high levels of sediment and silt in the Brisbane River demonstrates the interrelationships of water quality, salinity and flooding. Some Brisbane suburbs were reportedly within six to 12 hours of running out of drinking water as a result of unprecedented levels of sediment.*

*Integrated catchment management approaches promote the need for a coordinated approach at all levels of government. They also promote community and private enterprise engagement. The inclusion of private landholders and the community is critical to the achievement of outcomes.*

*When approaching flood risk management, other jurisdictions within Australia have recognised the importance of this approach. Both New South Wales and Victoria have created statutory bodies called Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) to facilitate a coordinated long-term approach to managing their catchments.*

*They do this by preparing regional catchment strategies and sub-strategies in consultation with communities. They also serve as a central point for driving investment and resources to councils, landholders and other service delivery agencies.*

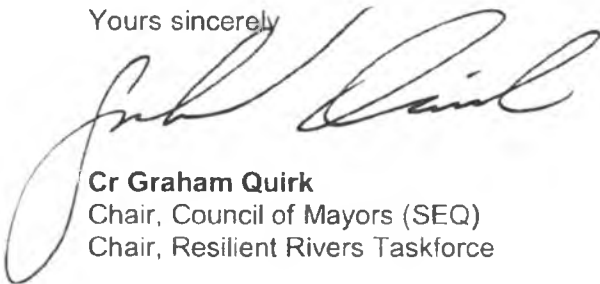
In consideration of the above points, the Mayors have discussed and agreed on the following position regarding the Auditor General's report:

1. The tasks identified within the Auditor General's recommendations are supported; however, without an overarching regional catchment management approach it is unlikely that a lasting solution to the underlying issues raised in the Report will be realised.
2. Introducing another government department (the Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning) into an already crowded space will not improve the existing poor level of coordination and the resulting ineffective support for on-ground actions.
3. Integrated catchment management planning and delivery is required as demonstrated by the January 2013 flood event which impacted the Lockyer catchment and saw 40% of the region's water supply put under risk due to siltation, with a considerable loss of productive farming soil.
4. A whole of SEQ region catchment management approach is the strongly preferred solution.

It should be noted that Council of Mayors (SEQ) put forward a similar position in its submission to the then Agriculture, Resources and Environment Parliamentary Committee in October 2014 as part of its deliberations on the amendments to the water related legislation including the *River Improvement Trust Act*.

Should you require any further information regarding our position on this matter, please do not hesitate to contact Peter Olah, Executive Director, Council of Mayors (SEQ) at (07) 3040-3460 or [peter.olah@seqmayors.qld.gov.au](mailto:peter.olah@seqmayors.qld.gov.au). I look forward to your positive consideration of the issues raised in our submission.

Yours sincerely



**Cr Graham Quirk**  
Chair, Council of Mayors (SEQ)  
Chair, Resilient Rivers Taskforce

cc. Members of the Resilient Rivers Taskforce  
Resilient Rivers partner organisations

