

Let's Make It Last: water security communication and engagement program

COUNCIL NAME

Bathurst Regional Council

WEB ADDRESS

bathurst.nsw.gov.au

SIZE

3,818 km²

POPULATION

43,206

Overview

'Water – Let's Make It Last' is Bathurst Regional Council's integrated communication, engagement, education and compliance program which has secured significant water savings by reducing residential consumption to a third over an 18 month period. Focusing on behavioural change, the community has complied with Council's water restrictions in response to record-breaking drought conditions and the related depletion of the Bathurst water supply.

Background

This Council-led program addressed the identified problem of water security, with rapidly depleting water supply from Chifley Dam, significant drought and no prediction of significant rainfalls through the usual recharge period July-August. Water security is highlighted by United Nations as a key sustainable development goal ([SDG#6](#)), necessary for life and sustainable growth and future prosperity of communities. Council needed to act to significantly reduce the rate of water consumption.

Implementation

A reduction in a water use was achieved through a comprehensive communication and engagement strategy identifying goals, objectives, target audiences, actions, guiding timeline and securing project budget. Dedicated resources managed project delivery, budget control, continuous monitoring of performance, and early identification of emerging opportunities and challenges.

The pressing need to extend the security of water supply and effect immediate and sustainable behavioural change were the key reasons for the method and complex steps of implementation undertaken by Council. Founded on earlier work engaging residents around water conservation, this program commenced in July 2019 in the lead-up to introduction of extreme level water restrictions, continuing to June 2020 and beyond. Council recognised the need for financial accountability whilst meeting water conservation targets. Program costs were under \$5 per capita.

Council undertook the following implementation steps:

- Aligned water restrictions with the Drought Management Plan.
- Identified the drivers of behavioural change from within the local community.
- Developed policies and procedures to give project structure, fairness and transparency including setting exemption criteria and an application process.
- Designed, produced and distributed communication and marketing collateral with the key message of 'Water-Let's Make It Last'. Collateral included community-designed stickers; brochures; dedicated web-pages; signage, letters to target groups (businesses, pool owners), e-newsletters, social media posts; advertising in local print, radio, tv media; ratepayers newsletter, Council web banner; email signature; street banner; cinema and bus advertising, plus video tutorials.
- Established a telephone hotline.
- Dedicate staff resources were provided to administer information support, exemption applications, compliance officer enforcing restrictions, monitoring and management.
- Free water audit service to top 20 business water consumers were provided along with a business information session.

- Council engaged horticulturist to design and deliver community gardening workshops plus Council provided a horticulturist advisory service.
- Alternative water supply management actions were investigated by NSW Water.

Outcomes

Substantial and sustained decrease in water consumption was achieved by households – from 353 litres per person per day in Jan 2019 to 152 litres in July 2019. The summer 2019/20 peaked at 170 litres p/p p/d and a further reduction in late May of 2020 to 130 litres p/p p/d.

High levels of community engagement throughout the program was reflected in the substantial number of in-person and online participants at garden workshops, visitors at shopping centre stalls, bookings at library children’s workshops, community and business information sessions, engagement with social media posts, awareness of advertising campaign elements and stakeholder meetings.

Alternative water sources were inspected and certified for use where appropriate. These certificated inspections reduced vexatious calls to the program hotline. There was uptake of temporary grey water usage during the project period.

Complementary to the engagement program, Council installed smart water meters to help identify water leakages and confirmed breaches of restrictions. Community assets including sports and recreation green spaces underwent water efficiency reviews, with more efficient water use practices introduced. A new bulk water metered filling station was installed, with innovative payment technology enabling rural residents improved access to water for stock and domestic use.

Key Learnings

The key to the success of the program has been building the capacity of the community, not relying on compliance measures to drive change. Whilst this approach requires a greater commitment of time and resources the benefits are substantial and more likely to be sustained. One distinct benefit is the transferable nature of the communications plan employed for the program and how it engaged with a broad cross section of the community. The ongoing costs to upgrade assets, engage the community and monitor water use is not insignificant but pales in comparison to the alternative social, environmental, cultural and economic impacts resulting from insufficient water supply.

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This project was the 2020 winner of the Communication, Education and Empowerment Award at the LGNSW Excellence in the Environment Awards