

AN INFORMATION BULLETIN FROM HARVEY WATER

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AGRICULTURAL WATER USE

Some questions and answers on agricultural water use

It is said that agriculture uses about 40% of the water use in WA.
What is the significance of this statistic ?

How was the 40% derived ?

- Harvey Water has investigated carefully and the figure of 40% is pretty much an estimate divided by a formula multiplied by a statistic plus an informed guess ! Remember that one of the greatest criticisms levelled at Department of Environment (DOE) by the Auditor General was that they did not measure the water use, so how could they really know what is happening in agriculture? In pointing this out we are not adding to the criticism of DOE but it is directed at those who would use this statistic as gospel to drive what has to be an ill informed a point of view.

How do we know 40% is very rubbery ?

- Agriculture use includes the bores on the Gngangara mound which have never been measured and monitored so that use must be a guess. Almost every farm paddock from Broome to Esperance has a dam or a bore in it – maybe half a million dams ?? Use has never been measured so it must be an estimate. Most of the fruit and grape properties in the south west have dams or bores which aren't measured. It has to be an estimate or a formula. And so on.

But what if 40% use by agriculture were close to the truth ?

- To which the answer is, So What ?
- Consider this: World wide the water used by agriculture is over 70%. In Australia it is over 65%. So at 40% in WA we are doing quite well !

Why do the uninformed try to make something out of it ?

- Generally the inference is that agricultural water could be used by urban people and that agriculture wastes water. Both of these arguments are furrphies.
- Agricultural water is used by:
 - Irrigators in the Ord River
 - Irrigators at Carnarvon
 - Pastoralists in the north west
 - Sheep and wheat farmers in the wheatbelt

- Fruit growers at Manjimup, Donnybrook, Gingin and in the Hills near Perth
- Vignerons across the South West, Frankland and Great Southern
- Vegetable growers at Myalup, Manjimup, Gnangara, Baldivis and elsewhere.
- And plenty of others

What is the relevance of that list ?

- The fact is that it is not economically feasible or sensible to try to aggregate all that agricultural water use to make it somehow available to the IWSS. You would have thousands of kilometres of pipeline and hundreds of pumps and treatment plants trying to get it all together to move it to where it could be used by urban dwellers. It does not compute ! So agricultural water use simply isn't competitive with IWSS use. They are two different pools of water and not cheap or easy to connect.

What about the inference that somehow farmers use too much water ?

- Two things. First, how would your average Joe or Jane Perthon know how water is used in agriculture and how much is reasonable ? And second, there is no argument that farmers, like all water users, cannot do better.
- Urban dwellers have disconnected from the bush. They have no concept of the production processes that bring them their 2 Fruit & 5 Veg at their "Fresh Food People" or "Fresh as the Morning" supermarkets. The simple fact is that urban dwellers who don't grow their own food, enter into an unrecognised agreement or perhaps even an unwritten contract with farmers, to allow them to use water to produce the food urban dwellers enjoy to eat every day.
- Farmers use water to produce food because urban dwellers, through market place demand, want them to. Simple as that !

How can farmers use water better ?

- On farm investment in improved water use technology can only come from borrowings or surpluses, both of which mean that the farm business has to make a profit. With supermarkets advertising "Lowest prices everyday ", but at the same time recording record profits, who do you think is bearing the cost ? Its certainly not consumers, its farmers, that's who ! So, if consumers paid more for their fresh food, and that extra payment went direct to farmers, they would more easily be able to invest in using water better.

What about city water use ?

- Harvey Water irrigates about 10 000 ha of land each year with untreated water straight from the dam to produce food products valued at \$100 million pa (1999). In the Perth metropolitan area there are about 14 000 ha of parkland, road verge, community open space etc which are irrigated using high cost potable quality water for what return? So who is wasting water? Urban dwellers or farmers ?