

6-11-2002

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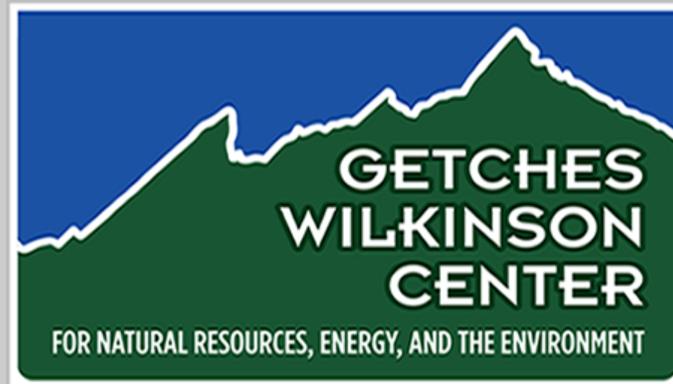
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Citation Information

Gumley, Wayne, "Environmental Flow Versus Private Water Rights: Lessons from the Snowy River [abstract]" (2002). *Allocating and Managing Water for a Sustainable Future: Lessons from Around the World (Summer Conference, June 11-14)*.
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Wayne Gumley, *Environmental Flow Versus Private Water Rights: Lessons from the Snowy River* [abstract], in *ALLOCATING AND MANAGING WATER FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: LESSONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD* (Natural Res. Law Ctr., Univ. of Colo. Sch. of Law 2002).

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Environmental Flow Versus Private Water Rights: Lessons from the Snowy River

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the recent experience from Australia on restoring environmental flows to major rivers, particularly the Snowy River, which was one of Australia's biggest rivers before it was subjected to a monumental hydro-electricity scheme during the 1950s. The Snowy River Scheme diverted over 99% of the river's natural eastward flow into the westward flowing Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers, where it ultimately became available for irrigation in drier inland areas. The upper reaches of the Snowy River were transformed into a small drain at the bottom of an empty river valley, whilst its lower reaches became a barren region of silts and sand. In 1996 an independent panel of experts recommended that to restore the ecological attributes of the river would require an increase in flows at the diversion point (Jindabyne) from the current 0.5% to at least 28% of its natural flow. This report was destined for obscurity until the 1999 election for the State of Victoria placed the balance of power in the hands of an independent candidate (Craig Ingram) whose electorate covered the lower reaches the Snowy River. As a result the Victorian government gave a commitment to push for restoration of environmental flow to the Snowy. However this task was far from easy, as it required the cooperation of many parties including the Federal government and the New South Wales government, who are Victoria's partners in the Snowy Hydro Scheme, and currently in the process of corporatisation and possible privatisation of the scheme. The other major interest group is the irrigators who fear a reduction in their water entitlements, and are thus pushing for greater security for their water rights.

This paper will examine the outcome of the Snowy River Plan to identify the broader policy implications for the management of Australia's scarce water resources. In

particular it will consider the implications of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Water Reform Agenda (which adopts a “competition policy” approach whereby State governments are encouraged to create more secure tradeable property rights for water) in the context of the broader objectives of “ecologically sustainable development” whereby the maintenance of appropriate environmental flows in river systems would be considered a minimum requirement to preserve and enhance the quality of inland ecosystems, in the interests of both conservationists and agricultural enterprises whose future viability depends upon the health of those ecosystems.