Dear Tammy,
I read with interest your article in the Ranges Trader Mail of Tuesday 4th November, on Victoria's water supply. It was good to learn of the plans for upgrading the Carrum Treatment plant to provide 100 GL p/a of recycled water, and that the State Government has commenced the long overdue upgrade of the old Irrigation System, to stop between 30 - 60% of the water leaking out.

However I find the plans for a Desalination Plant quite worrying, for the following reasons:
1. PRIVATISATION. It will probably involve us in yet another "public-private-partnership" (PPP), which is basically another name for privatisation. Some things can, and possibly should, successfully be privatised, but our drinking water, literally a life and death matter, I believe is NOT one of them.

a. A private company must by its nature put its profits and shareholders first, not the public interest; if it comes to the crunch, high quality water will go where the money is, and not be shared equitably by all citizens. There is a high probability that where profits prove hard to achieve, shortages and exploitation will go up, and equity and quality will go down. Monsanto's attempt to privatise the world's food supply via GM and patenting may be a good example; in Victoria, Connex in public transport, the private rental market in housing, and US pharmacutical companies in the health business are other examples close at hand. We have already been 'softened up' for impending price rises - a higher price makes the system more attractive for sale.

b. Governments are voted in, but private companies are not - they are usually both secretive and unaccountable to the public, however "customer focussed" they may be. When things go wrong, PPP's allow governments and companies to pass the buck to each other; this makes correction of problems more difficult than ever. Imagine one's water supply controlled by a foreign country - and we don't even have the right to clean drinking water in a Bill Of Rights.

c. As it would be in the interests of a private company to keep water somewhat scarce and expensive, what incentive would a company have to relieve scarcity by investment in water efficiency, or allow Governments to go on subsidising rainwater tanks, environmental flows and the like? Look what the influence of the fossil fuel lobby on the Howard Government did, in terms of strangling its (already weak) support for the renewable energy industry. Cost effectiveness had nothing to do with it.

2. COST. A recent story in the Herald/Sun described the proposed Desal contract as lasting 25 (twenty-five!) years, with the Government paying the company "operating fees" of $60 Million of our money per year. Over the life of the contract this will add about $1.5 BILLION to the $3 Billion cost of building the thing....it seems to me you could fit most new and existing houses in Aus with a water tank & new showerhead for under this. In fact Marsden Jacobs Associates did a report in April '07, concluding that this course would save more water than the Desal would produce, cost less, AND save the Bay from most of that nasty polluted run-off.

3. ENERGY INTENSITY. Desal plants use a phenomenal amount of power. In Victoria now, most of our electricity still comes from one of the dirtiest forms of power, ie brown coal. This is only cheap because it is heavily subsidised by the Government, and by our grandchildren who will have to pay the costs of the Global Warming thus produced. For the Desal to be 'carbon neutral', it seems Victoria will have to build another 90 - 120 MegaWatts of wind and solar generators. The proposed use of Greenpower for the Desal plant will merely suck up our present small supplies, and leave the rest of us using more "black" power, whether we are paying the premium or not.

4. MARINE CONTAMINATION. We have no idea what the effluent will do when it is pumped back into Bass Strait, but there are many creatures that are sensitve to it. Concentrated brine is heavier than normal seawater, and also, unless well mixed at the surface, contains less oxygen, so it could be a big killer of sea-floor life, and could create a large dead zone over time. We are getting mixed messages about whether enough surface mixing will occur - some scientists have reasonable doubts, so there is a risk.

5. SOCIAL EFFECTS. Most of these big plants are not in fact labour intensive after the building phase, and tend to reduce jobs in the area rather than create them. (Compare the ongoing jobs offered by small businesses selling water tanks, retrofits and efficiency design services.) One of the articles I enclose, describes the problem of the proposed high voltage pylons reducing farm incomes in the region.

Knowing that the Victorian Government is quite pro-GM, I was most impressed and moved by your courage in standing up against this threat to our environment and our health. So in the same spirit I hope you will consider these problems and present them to the Parliamentary Environment and Natural Resource Committee. I enclose a couple of relevant articles on the subject. We all know that water is a matter of vital importance: if we make the wrong decision now, we may live to regret it for decades (just look at our public transport problems.)

Be strong and of Good Courage -
Yours,

Rose Ovenden