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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Melbourne's future water supply

Melbourne — 8 September 2008

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Ms K. O'Shanassy, chief executive officer, Environment Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for joining us. I would just like to remind you that all evidence taken at the hearing today is covered by parliamentary privilege as provided under the Constitution Act 1975 and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence today is being recorded. I know you have been here for most of the session so you know the rules. We welcome you, Kelly, and ask you to present to us, please.

Ms O'SHANASSY — Thank you very much, and thank you for inviting us to present. We hope that this leads to some better outcomes for water planning in Melbourne, which we would like to go through today. Environment Victoria and many of our member organisations take an interest in water planning because most of our water at present comes from rivers. In fact pretty much all of Melbourne's water comes from two rivers, the Yarra and Thomson rivers, although the majority in a normal year comes from the Yarra River. Water planning has a very big impact on the health of those rivers, and I want to focus a little bit on that today.

What I did want to let you know is that I am the CEO of Environment Victoria but my last job was heading up the planning for Melbourne's water future. There was no desalination plant or north–south pipeline when I was in charge of that particular plan, but then the Victorian government's water plan, mark 2 or whatever it is called, came out about a year after that. I was also on the Premier's steering committee for the food bowl modernisation, so I have quite a lot of insight into those particular aspects, and I will talk a little bit about those later.

Just first I want to talk a little bit about environmental water rights. I may just explain a little bit about environmental water flows, although I know a lot of you have a very good understanding of those, but they are not well understood in the public. Basically, environmental flows are the water a river needs to reach a level of health that protects the environmental values of that river and everything that depends on that river like irrigation, being able to drink the water, tourism and a number of other things. I use the phrase 'reach a level of health' rather than 'maintain a level of health' as no major river that Melbourne relies on is in fact healthy at this point in time. Most rivers in Victoria are not healthy at this time. I think it is around 20 per cent that are in good or very good condition, given the government's data, and the rest are in declining or poor condition.

Secondly, environmental flows are not constant flows. They vary throughout the year, ranging from floods to high-water events, low-flow events and periods of dry. Maintaining environmental flows and using a river can actually occur simultaneously; it is what we call 'working rivers'. There is a concept or a belief out there that you have to protect the river — protect it either for irrigation or for consumptive use — but the reality is you can use it for all purposes and the balance needs to be reached, and that has not been reached in the past.

The third thing of course, as you would know, is that environmental water allocations are protected by law and are a legal right of the river but can be qualified by relevant ministers. We believe that almost every environmental allocation in the state at present has in fact been qualified this year.

In terms of Melbourne's water planning, as I mentioned not one river in the central region, which is where the water planning began for Melbourne through the Central Region Sustainable Water Strategy, receives the flow that it needs to maintain a minimum level of health. An example is the Yarra River. Scientific research showed that it needed 17 gigalitres or 17 billion litres of additional water to return it to health, which is around 2 per cent of its average flow. This was promised through the Central Region Sustainable Water Strategy in 2006 but is yet to be delivered. Since then a further 10 gigalitres has been extracted, making the shortfall 27 gigalitres. The government promised in the Victorian water plan that it would take 10 gigalitres out of the Yarra and 10 gigalitres out of the Thomson only if we went to stage 4 restrictions, but of course both those allocations have been taken without going to stage 4 restrictions.

The other river of course that we are dependent on in Melbourne is the Thomson River, which was promised 15 gigalitres in the central region sustainable water strategy, and it needs 47 gigalitres. Of course that has not been delivered at all. What has been promised is only a part of what is actually needed to meet the minimum level of health. We are only part of the way to where we need to go, and we are not delivering that part of the way. I guess the point of that is that environmental flows are fundamental to underpinning everything we need a river for, and they are the first things that have been sacrificed under the water planning to date.

One point that I think is important to make is that there are some people who might debate that it is understandable that in the short term you would qualify environmental flows because this is the driest period ever on record that we

have experienced in Victoria. I would argue with that, but there are some people who would say that, and I think that is an argument that should be put forward.

My issue is that I do not think it is a short-term problem. I think it is part of long-term thinking, and there is evidence of that. If you look at the food bowl modernisation process and the commitment to providing 75 gigalitres of water to Melbourne in 2010, because we will not necessarily have those water-efficient savings by 2010, as part of the plan the government put forward it said it would take water from the Goulburn Broken water quality allocation and also from water savings that were bought and paid for by organisations that bought that water for the Snowy and for the Murray. Again, three years before we need the water we have made that decision, and what we would like to point out is that there are other options rather than automatically taking water from rivers. Whilst it is debatable whether in the short term you need to depend on rivers more for water, we are making these decisions at least with a medium-term outlook. That comes back to how we make our decisions and how we value the environment.

As it was done as an emergency response — and it was called an emergency response — to take that additional 10 gigalitres from the Yarra and from the Thomson, I believe we are not dealing with it as an emergency response. There is evidence to say that even if we have other options, we are still looking at this as our first opportunity.

I would just like to take the opportunity now to talk about what we do and do not support out of the water planning. I am sure the committee is aware of many of these positions. The desalination plant it is not something that Environment Victoria supports. There are a number of reasons. One of the key reasons is that it does limit our options into the future. With 150 billion litres of water, it takes up almost all of the storage capacity in Melbourne, and if in future you wanted to use water like recycled water, it becomes very difficult to do so because you do not have the storage capacity as we are building a very large desalination plant. So it limits our flexibility into the future. We believe it might undermine water efficiency savings: if you have a lot of water, you do not need to be as efficient. And we heard the government say it is promoting rainwater tanks now, but it might not do that into the future. We are concerned that might happen with water efficiency as well.

There are arguments that the market will drive water savings. There is pretty clear evidence that the market in the past has not driven resource efficiencies. The government of Victoria has recognised that and put programs in place, including regulatory programs, to drive resource efficiency. So we are concerned that if it is just a market approach for water efficiency and there is a lot of water on the market, then people will not necessarily want to save that.

Lastly, of course, there could be some greenhouse implications, even if it is offset with 100 per cent accredited green energy, which we hope is what the government puts forward if it goes ahead with a desalination plant. That is equivalent to five wind farms of about 50-megawatt capacity. We currently have only five in Victoria, and only one is larger than 50 megawatts. So it takes all of our current wind capacity, and it really limits our opportunity to reduce our greenhouse emissions moving into the future, which is of course something that we need to do. A desalination plant is also very expensive.

On the pipeline, EV is very supportive of the food bowl modernisation process and being as efficient as possible with water and irrigation systems. Of course we have been arguing that for years, so we support the VFF's position on that. We agree as well on — and we do not support — the pipeline to Melbourne, mainly because Melbourne has other options, as we will list in a second, and northern Victoria really does not have a lot of options. It relies on what falls out of the sky to feed irrigation systems, communities and rivers. Melbourne has recycling options, it can be more efficient, and there are a number of opportunities there. As the government has pointed out, although we do not support it, it has the surrounding sea and it can use desalinated water.

The other thing to take into account, and I think it was discussed earlier, is the return on investment for Melbourne's part of that modernisation. The work coming out of the Northern Region Sustainable Water Strategy that overlays climate projections on the amount of water available in northern Victoria shows that if the rainfall is like it has been over the last 10 years, Melbourne will only get that 75 gigalitres in 43 out of every 100 years; in other years it is likely to get less than that, because it is high reliability water but there will not be as much water into the future. That should be taken into account in terms of investment to get that water into Melbourne.

Having said that, though, there is no reason why we should not be as efficient as possible. We should most certainly be investing in irrigation efficiency in northern Victoria, but we agree very strongly with the VFF that that should

remain in communities in northern Victoria, including providing water back to rivers. That is a fundamental reason why we do not support the pipeline.

We do not support dams. We very clearly support the government's views on no dams. We do not believe at all that water going to the sea is a waste or is wastewater. I think a lot of scientists and scientific evidence back that up. Even if you did not want to believe the scientists, you could just look at the Coorong or the Gippsland Lakes and see that water flowing out into estuarine ecosystems is an incredibly important component of the health of those systems. We have very few rivers in Victoria that have not been dammed or affected in any way; there is only a very small number, and some of them are in Gippsland. There are one or two in northern Victoria, and those rivers are really important, particularly in the north, because they provide most of the environmental flows that go into the Murray at the moment because they are unregulated. So if you regulate those, you have real problems in the Murray River as well.

The last major issue that is being examined at the moment that we do not support is recycling water and putting it into the Yarra River just downstream of Sugarloaf. We did talk a little bit before about the water being too sterile, and that is true, as amazing as that sounds. But the other key issue with that is that it is a constant supply of water, and the environment actually needs ebbs and flows of water, as I outlined earlier. Unless there is a storage for this recycled water, you cannot really deal with it by putting it into the Yarra because it is sterile and because it is a constant flow. I think there are a lot of philosophical issues associated with it as well, such as the thinking that it is not good enough for us to use in any other way but we will dump it into the river and we will take a lot more out of the river. It does not show a great deal of faith or value placed on water environments.

Onto the better news, though, we do actually support a number of options. Moving forward, we believe very strongly that we can boost water efficiency in Melbourne, including through the use of rainwater tanks. For example, we are going to have around 725 000 new homes over the next nearly 40 years; that was predicted before the big population growth that we are now seeing, so that number will no doubt be larger. There is really no reason why every single building and every single house that is built should not be water efficient — and also energy efficient and efficient in other ways, but we are talking about water today. We believe that has the capacity to save quite a lot of water if we put in place 7-star standards for existing homes, for example, and an increased standard for water efficiency in commercial buildings, which currently is not in place.

That deals with new buildings, but of course there are a million existing homes and many existing commercial buildings in Melbourne. We believe there should be a retrofit of those buildings. Our figure is at 5 per cent a year, and that retrofit can take place at sale or lease of a building. If you set a standard for the retrofit, the standard would not be as high as you would set for a new building, but you could put things in such as flow-efficient taps, showerheads and dishwashers and things like those that are not too expensive to put in, particularly taps and showerheads. But there is no requirement to have those in existing homes at this point in time.

We can fast-track standards for water-using appliances and fixtures. At this point in time you can make or import into Australia an inefficient washing machine or showerhead. There is no real reason why you cannot wash your clothes as efficiently as possible: as long as they are clean, that is what you need, and we can do that with half as much water, so we really should be pushing that forward.

As I mentioned before, we believe strongly that this does require additional drivers apart from just the market drivers. We have seen some fantastic water improvements in Melbourne and across Victoria and a terrific uptake of rainwater tanks.

We could do more and get far more savings from that if we had a greater push behind them. We believe that potable water use — reuse of recycled water for drinking — should be an option that is put on the table and publicly debated. There is a clear policy from government to not do that, to not have that public debate. When I did my sums in WaterSmart, which is the group I headed up, we looked at lots of different options, including desalination and using recycled water. Based on this preliminary work, and there would have to be a lot more work done of course, the use of recycled water used around a third less energy than treating sea water — that was based on the eastern treatment plant water — because you do have to use the same process, the reverse osmosis process, but it takes a lot less energy to take salt out of water than it does to take nutrients out of water. The salt of the eastern treatment plant water is only around 500 milligrams per litre compared to sea, which is something like 33 000 milligrams per litre of water.

It is an option that could provide 100 billion to 150 billion litres of water coming out of the eastern treatment plant. There is the western treatment plant as well, which is a bit more complicated because it is saltier. But it is a climate-independent source of water, it is water that we have got and a water source that will grow as populations grow, and it really should be seriously looked at.

The use of water in a third pipe scenario — so providing it for non-potable use — should be looked at in areas that are close to sewage treatment plants, or that could be harvested from sewers. It is difficult to retrofit Melbourne and provide a third pipe across Melbourne, because it would cost a lot more than desalination; probably three or four times more, and you would have to dig up every street and every house, so it is really impractical for that purpose. This is why serious consideration of cleaning recycled water and putting it into the drinking system needs to be undertaken.

We do support very strongly the removal of logging from water catchments. This has been around for a very long time. The data shows that you would get around 30 gigalitres of water if you did that. That would take a number of years to come to fruition, but if we had enacted it 20 years ago when we started talking about it, then we would have some of that water now.

We believe that the environmental flows should be provided to the Yarra and the Thomson as soon as possible. We recognise that if we do not build an alternative supply like recycled water, putting it back into the potable supply, we will continue to be dependent on our rivers. We know that efficiency in rainwater tanks can provide an enormous amount of savings but not the whole amount of savings that is needed. We support potable water recycling. We understand that we have left the decision making fairly late. We were talking about demand management a number of years ago.

We do not support desalination. I need to make that clear, but if the government goes ahead with it I think it is best that those plants are smaller, that they are ratcheted up if they are needed so that the flexibility is protected, and that they use 100 per cent accredited green energy. And, if that is going to happen, there needs to be an iron clad agreement that water will be provided back to those rivers, because if we have got an alternative supply we should not be draining our rivers constantly. Again, we do not support a desalination plant but recognise that — and I understand it is not raining — some things need to be done fairly quickly, and we need to open up some of the policy debate around the alternative supply so that we are not railroaded into one which is, at this point in time, the desalination plant.

The CHAIR — Firstly, you mentioned banning logging in water catchments and you quoted some studies on increasing water yield. When we had our bushfire inquiry we also had a submission from VicForests saying that in its view an active management of forestry, like thinning around water catchments, might actually increase yield in the dams; what is your response to that other bit of scientific evidence or view?

Ms O'SHANASSY — I have not seen that evidence. When you log trees it actually takes quite a while for the trees to grow back and that takes a lot of water — young trees take a lot of water. If you ban it completely you get 30 gigalitres — if you stop it right now; if you did it at a slower process, obviously you would not get nearly enough, and I do not know how that process would work. It is pretty difficult to log some areas or parts of areas and not other parts because of access. I have not seen that data. I have seen the data from the Department of Primary Industries a number of years ago and for Melbourne Water, which was the data that I presented to you, and that data, and also the government's central region sustainable water strategy and the white paper, did actually give quite an indication that government would be looking at phasing out logging in those catchments, and putting in place packages that would enable that to happen. I understood that the work to be happening was the economic work around the packages for transitioning. I do not know how that has progressed. I was up to date with that two years ago in terms of the transitional work, so I cannot talk about that new evidence that you have.

The CHAIR — Okay, you can have a look at it here.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you, that was a very good presentation. I was pretty interested in one aspect of your submission which was section — —

The CHAIR — I hope more than one aspect.

Mrs PETROVICH — There were a number of aspects, but one in particular struck me. What environmental impact will there be on the Goulburn Broken catchment system and the Murray-Darling Basin if

Melbourne takes 75 gigs via the north–south pipeline, based on the questionable figures that you cite in section E of your submission, of available water created, by the food bowl modernisation project?

Ms O'SHANASSY — There will be a short-term impact and longer term impact. The short-term impact will mean that if Melbourne does borrow that water that it says it needs to borrow to get the 75 gigalitres in 2010, the water quality reserve for the Goulburn and the Broken rivers will be diminished and in that year, if there is a fish kill, an algal bloom, a high level of nutrients or a number of other scenarios, that water will not be available to help flush those systems and protect those systems. Also the Snowy and the Murray will not receive for another year its water that it was promised for 2009, so it will not receive those until 2012. Those are the shorter term impacts.

The longer term impacts are twofold, I suppose. One is in terms of where the water will be extracted, and there will always be an impact when you take water out of a river at that local site, and it depends on the final extraction site, but it will have some local effects: scouring effects and erosion effects. The longer term impact is that those rivers need billions and billions of litres of water, and the 75 gigalitres that would be provided under the food bowl modernisation for the river would be terrific and a good start. That has got to be spread across the Goulburn, the Broken, the Loddon, the Campaspe — the whole food bowl region and of course the Murray. If the extra 100 comes in from part 2 of that, then that will help too, but those rivers in a normal year have 18 per cent flow left in them after everything is extracted. In the last 10 years it has had significantly less. A number of those rivers like the Campaspe have stopped running.

The longer term impact is that anything provided to Melbourne will not be there for the environment and will not be there for the irrigation communities to share. Whilst it is 75 gigalitres, it could be very well used for the environment, and I imagine VFF would say for farmers as well.

Mrs PETROVICH — If we do have the sorts of thing you are talking about with an algal bloom or a fish kill or high nutrient content, how then does that impact on other users, say the towns and the irrigators and other businesses that would be drawing on that supply?

Ms O'SHANASSY — Once you have got an algal bloom in a river, a lot of those, particularly the blue-green algal blooms, can be toxic. A number of those we have seen in the Gippsland Lakes, and then you cannot swim there, you cannot use it for stock and it would limit, I would imagine, although I am not an expert, how you can apply it to crops because it is toxic. The dairy industry is pretty strong in northern Victoria, and I believe uses the vast majority of the water. I do not think you would be able to use it to water the pasture, so it has a huge impact. Of course tourism is growing in those areas as well so it would have a significant impact.

Mr INGRAM — Following on from the Chair's question earlier, when the committee was looking at the bushfire issues, we inspected some sites in Western Australia. There are some trials there where they are looking at the historical management of the catchment, basically returning forests back to a more natural density. Basically the argument is that most of our catchments are more dense now and more stems per hectare in trees because of changes in farm management and changes in land management. So to thin those there is a decline — basically less trees grow faster but take less water out of the catchments; there is a greater run-off. If you look at your submission on page 10, you have used a bit of the Marsden Jacobs report, which says the most efficient savings are from catchment thinning. Do you support that document that you have used in your submission?

Ms O'SHANASSY — No, that document we have used there is to show the benefit of the rainwater tanks. I am just looking at whether that one is from Marsden Jacobs. It does not have a figure on it. Oh yes, there it is. We are using that to show that in particular. You can also increase run-off from cutting down all the trees and concreting a catchment. In fact we put a whole lot of crazy ideas when we were doing the water supply management strategy. That happened to come up as one. Of course we would never do that.

There are enormous benefits to ecosystems to have natural forests. So there are a lot of benefits to water supply as well as CO_2 sequestration, as well as ecosystems to protect those forests. I think thinning has a number of issues. If you left a forest intact, it is going to have more run-off than if you logged some of it and continued to log some of it, because trees have to continue to grow. But I recognise that that would take a number of decades.

Mr INGRAM — The argument that this whole process was based on though — and I think it is the basis of the cost benefit of catchment thinning in here — is that if you look at the Melbourne water catchments, fire is the predominant reason why we have major, single-age ash species through there; it is not logging, which is only a

small portion of that catchment. If you actually thinned to a more natural density of timber in most of those areas, you would actually increase the run-off much more than you would by removing logging a very small percentage of it. My interpretation was that that was probably a more realistic assessment of the outcome than what you are proposing in your submission.

Ms O'SHANASSY — I guess that is up to you guys to have a look at. I should have gone back and looked at the white paper before I came here, but there was a commitment in there to move that away. So obviously at the time the government thought that was the right opportunity. The 1939 fires obviously changed the make-up of that catchment and, of course, really affected the amount of water that we could get out of that catchment. I therefore would have thought that the vegetation type in that catchment is relatively natural because it regenerated itself after the fires. I am not an expert in forestry, though. You would be changing the natural ecosystems, of course, as well as a number of other things. Manipulating natural ecosystems has a way of coming to kick us back in the butt, as we see through climate change, because we do not get to do everything.

Mr INGRAM — But would you argue that the biggest risk to the Melbourne water catchments would be wildfire?

Ms O'SHANASSY — It is a risk that Melbourne Water spends a lot of money and time managing. There is a very big risk.

Ms DUNCAN — Thank you for your presentation. I looked at your summary of your proposals versus what is planned by the government, and obviously you are putting a lot of effort into drinking recycled water — 100 gigalitres within four years. You made a reference to not assuming that people's attitude to that would remain the same. As we know, generally speaking, it is a probably a general statement that the community is opposed to drinking recycled water. Has EV done any work on that recently to suggest that those attitudes may be changing?

Ms O'SHANASSY — I just stress that the work you see here is a work in progress because we are such a small organisation without a lot of funding. We are still working on this, and we will release our vision for Melbourne water's future in a month or two. We have not done that work, but when I was at WaterSmart we did do that work. Around the time of the white paper they did some community work and some market research asking, 'Would you drink wastewater?'.

Amazingly enough, 12 per cent of the population said it would. Of course, if you ask, 'Will you drink wee and poo?', then that is what people say. But if you ask the question, 'Would you drink recycled water?' — we asked that question before giving any information — people gave us a response. We asked them to rank all of the other options as well, including desalinated water and all of the water efficiency options and tanks. This is our market research and they ranked it. Then they had a debate amongst themselves; they got the pros and cons of each opportunity, and then they said, 'Right, we need 200 billion litres of water from Melbourne, you then tell us what you would accept'. When you got that information the desalination plant went down dramatically and recycled water for potable supply went up dramatically. It was actually around 49 per cent. They were focus groups. We did market research in about four or five different areas. That information is available. It was publicly available at the time, and I can make sure that you do receive a copy of that, because it is really interesting that when you have debate around it, people change their attitude, but if you have a one-off question, and the question is loaded, then you are going to get the answer that you want.

Ms DUNCAN — There tends to be a difference between debating academically and actually proposing something, as we saw up in Queensland. That may not be indicative, though. The other point — if I can just talk about it — you talk about 25 billion litres a year from upgrading the building stock in Melbourne and a 5 per cent rate per year. In fact you are assuming that we would get 25 gigalitres within four years of that. Where have you seen that, because we did a reference on that, and that would seem to be extremely optimistic? How would you go about getting that sort of uptake, which we have not seen anywhere else, and also, what are the costings on new 7-star housing stock?

Ms O'SHANASSY — The first question is — yes, it is ambitious to get a large amount of savings quickly from water conservation. It requires some sort of intervention around the sale of home and lease of home and building, because that is when you get the turnover. There is a significant turnover of buildings — or there used to be. I am trying to buy a house at the moment. It is quite difficult, there are not too many for sale, but there used to be a high turnover; it was about 8 per cent of homes in Melbourne. That figure, in terms of those savings, is based

on actually savings that have been made in Queensland. There is a new complex in Geelong where there are some of those savings. You can get up to 70 per cent in savings. That would include a tank though. With a 7-star home — I know DSE has done some work on this — the cost really depends on whether you mandate a specific item or whether you mandate a standard. We would support mandating a standard because it gives flexibility in how you meet that.

For example, there are new toilets that are very low-flush toilets. They still flush, of course, and do the job. You could have one of those instead of a rainwater tank. You are going to have a toilet anyway, so it is not really going to increase the cost, but you can have those savings. Other people may want to have a rainwater tank, because they may have a big garden or something like that. It will increase the cost of new homes, there is no doubt about that, but there are a number of financial institutions that give you a reduction on your loan if you have a 5-star or more home. So it could actually save you money in the short term and in the longer term. There is no doubt that more work needs to be done on that, and I do not think the government — and I put myself in that category when I was working there — has taken water efficiency to the level that it needs to be taken. I know that rainwater tanks are not being looked at in the way that they need to be looked at. They are a bit more expensive to put in place. Per megalitre of water they are more expensive, but they have a lot of ecological benefits in terms of run-off for nutrient capture and a range of other benefits. It really does depend on how you go about it. That is why there should be a standard for water efficiency as opposed to mandating specific infrastructure.

Mr WALSH — Thanks for your presentation, Kelly. In your submission you seem to have a different slant on the yield of rainwater and the cost of rainwater versus what Melbourne Water and DSE are saying. They have come to a conclusion; you have come to a different conclusion. Who is right and who is wrong?

Ms O'SHANASSY — There is a lot of information out there. We have run our information past the people who are considered to be the experts in this at the University of Melbourne and other areas; people like Barry Hart and Chris Walsh. When I was at WaterSmart we did quite a lot of work on rainwater tanks and their ability to provide water and their cost. Of course the larger the tank and the more it is tapped into your home, the lower the cost overall per megalitre. I do not believe that that information is getting out to the public. I think it is complicated and difficult to come by, and it is confusing. We have spent quite a lot of time going through it. My background means I have a lot of expertise in this, but you can be confused easily.

We believe very strongly that there needs to be a very solid piece of work about the ability of rainwater tanks to provide water for Melbourne. It should take into account the fact that it may not rain as much and that the rain differential across Melbourne will be different. We looked at that at WaterSmart. We looked at the fact that in the west it rains less than in the east, and what that difference means. We costed it out and we used those costings in here. If the department has updated or changed those we are not aware of that information. But a lot of it has not been made public, just as the stage 4 savings — and it was great to see that question asked because we have been asking it for a long time, and that information has not been made public. It is difficult to assess why we have never gone to stage 4.

Mr WALSH — Does Environment Victoria support the conspiracy theories that are going around that the government does not want rainwater tanks because it will undermine the viability of the desalination plant and the north-south pipeline?

Ms O'SHANASSY — Given I have been told that by DSE staff, I can only believe what I have been told. I am not sure it is a conspiracy theory, but certainly there is an argument out there that rainwater tanks are expensive per megalitre of water. If we had the desalination plant it could be a cheaper way of producing water. It may not depend on the desalination plant and rainwater tanks, but the way you can calculate megalitres of water per dollar, or dollars per megalitre varies. There are a lot of different methodologies. No-one has put out there into the public the comparison for all options for Melbourne using the same methodology. Without that it is very difficult to compare them. That has not been done.

Mr WALSH — Why do you believe that it is not out there in the public arena if we have an open and transparent government?

Ms O'SHANASSY — Very clearly — and this is our clear position — the water plan that followed the central region sustainable water plan was not done openly and transparently. It came out with no consultation. That has been a big criticism of it from communities, as seen through the desalination plant and other backlashes. If it

had been me, and of course I am not a politician or a member of Parliament, I would have provided that information, because that is the best way to convince people that you are right. If you think that rainwater tanks are not right then show them why not. Organisations like mine will always go out and get data from experts that would then query whether or not that is right.

Yes, I believe that support for the large desalination plant has reduced the momentum and motivation to look at other alternatives for efficiency and tanks, and I think we heard that evidence today.

Ms DUNCAN — From the government or from individuals?

Ms O'SHANASSY — DSE today said that we will not have as much push behind tanks in a few years time. There are really not a lot of reasons why you should not be as efficient as you can with water because it costs a lot of money and CO_2 emissions to produce water from the sea. I believe that information should be made available. It would be very useful for this committee to be able to come out with that. You will find what you find but based on comparable data. That is something we have not been able to do before.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submission today, Kelly.

Ms O'SHANASSY — My pleasure.

The CHAIR — You will get a transcript in the next few weeks which will include instructions on what to do with it. I will close the hearing now and thank everyone for attending.

Committee adjourned.