

Sydney Morning Herald, Letters, 24 March 2005

Dr Andrew Leigh is right; water is simply too cheap in this country ("A simple solution to those annoying water restrictions", *Herald*, March 23).

Rather than consider expensive and polluting desalination plants, the most effective conservation measures that could be introduced would be to raise the price significantly and to provide incentives for householders to install tanks and retain water that falls on their properties.

As our politicians know, threatened financial pain is the most effective educator.

John Addley Killara

* * * * *

Sydney Morning Herald, Letters, 26 March 2005

How to save all that rainfall running into the ocean

Water recycling was canvassed, but the analysis missed some key issues ("Too slow to save the H₂O, say recycling experts", *Herald*, March 23). No mention was made of two recycling schemes in Sydney (Rouse Hill and Sydney Olympic Park), nor of good work being done in the Illawarra with Bluescope Steel.

Although the Premier has balked at acting on the declaration by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal in favour of private sector access to Sydney's outfall sewers, the commissioning of an independent report by the tribunal was the correct policy response.

Apart from getting the access framework right, it's also essential to have health and other regulators on board. Purifying (and removing salt from) waste water is more economical than desalinating seawater, but any potential risks to consumers have to be managed to the complete satisfaction of consumers and the health department.

The Government's stated intention to initiate recycling schemes in growth areas of the north-west and south-west is laudable and I hope we'll see early action there. Change will be best achieved by evolution, not revolution.

Chris Davis Chief executive, Australian Water Association, Artarmon

While Andrew Leigh finds water restrictions irritating ("A simple solution to those annoying water restrictions", *Herald*, March 23) they have been enormously successful in reducing the amount of water we consume.

When the water storage in our dams drops to precarious levels, water restrictions allow the community to target specific types of water use in an equitable way.

There is a significant public benefit to be derived from maximising the amount of water available for environmental flows as well as ensuring security of water supply in the future. Dr Leigh is right in suggesting that more needs to be done to reduce our demand for water. The question is how to maximise behaviour change and minimise social cost.

Elissa Freeman Policy officer, Public Interest Advocacy Centre, Sydney

Andrew Leigh suggests that the only way to reduce water usage is to get rid of water restrictions and increase the price of water. Hopefully it won't get to the stage when we need to attach locks to our outside taps.

Carolyn Wills Cremorne

It is my belief that we don't exactly pay for water and, if we do, we shouldn't. We do, however, pay for its supply into our houses.

Water, like air and sunlight, is a basic necessity of life, not an extra or an alternative. However, because of the way our product-based consumer society is organised and seen by economists such as Andrew Leigh, it is perhaps understandable that he writes about it in those terms.

Our consumption of water should certainly be regulated and a charge maintained for its supply, but its status as a necessity should be preserved without putting a dollar value on this need.

Malcolm Harrison Rose Bay

Andrew Leigh puts forth two solutions: restrictions or increasing the cost of water. What about a government-implemented program offering incentives to promote the installation of household water tanks and grey water recycling systems?

Increasing the cost of water would have the far more serious social ramification of further promoting a two-tier society and would only serve to broaden the gap between rich and poor.

As Dr Leigh points out, the rich use more water than the poor, but he makes no effort to question why this is so. Merely increasing the cost of water would allow the rich to hose leaves and excrement from their driveways, run sprinklers on gardens unsuited to our climate and wash their 4WDs to their heart's content. Meanwhile the poor would be sharing their bath water.

Increasing the cost of water would not guarantee a reduction in water usage but would certainly ensure that the grass is greener on one side.

Dr Sophie Scamps Avalon

John Addley suggests water is too cheap and the price needs to go up (Letters, March 24). Too cheap for whom? Water is a rather substantial cost for people on single incomes, and increasing its cost will certainly not make available funds to install \$3000-plus rainwater tanks.

I object to "paying off" government for not supplying adequate infrastructure for this rather basic commodity over the last 20 years.

Ray Smith Blacktown

Once more Sydney has experienced torrential rainfall and once more most of it has been swept out to sea via our stormwater outlets and ocean outfalls. How long do we have to wait for Sydney Water to take a creative approach to treating and recycling our water in this time of climate change?

Margaret Smith Newtown