



**AUSTRALIAN FOOD
SOVEREIGNTY ALLIANCE**

Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance Peoples' Food Plan

Water

Executive summary

For millennia, water has been held in the soil and landscape. This has been steadily decreasing over time due to the introduction of colonial agriculture systems, including sheep, cattle, monocultures of annual crops (many ill suited to a water scarce continent and most exported for profit for the few), and a disregard for First Peoples' land management practices.

Water is precious like a sacred site; we need to be consulted and asked. Our ancestors have been here forever and still are. Working together, better communication.

Community members from Yeperenye in Northern Territory.¹

Water must be viewed as a vital part of sustaining all life, from soils and crops, to animals and human beings. For over 65,000 years First Peoples have adopted this way of thinking and interacting with water as kin, not as a commodity. And yet in the relatively short time since Invasion, First Peoples have borne the brunt of the negative consequences of increasingly scarce and polluted water sources caused by colonial regimes.

While climate change threatens the availability and safety of inland water sources, colonial capitalist agriculture systems are still supported by government policy (and funding) to export more than 72 percent of what is produced here. Water is extracted by corporations at very low expense to be bottled in plastic and sold to distant communities for immense profits at the expense of the water security of local communities, in particular First Peoples, Country and farmers. It is not only inland waters abused by colonial systems - industrial aquaculture is killing marine and coastal ecosystems as governments prioritise growing the 'blue economy' over assuring Blue Justice.

In addition to assuring the rights of First Peoples, smallholders and local communities, the Peoples' Food Plan fundamentally rejects the treatment of water as a commodity and asserts access to water as a human

¹ Vanweydevel, 2022

right, and water as having the right to exist and to flow as a right of Nature. The case studies profile local settler, migrant, and First Peoples communities collectivising to protect these rights from Martuwarra (Fitzroy River) in the west to Dhungala (Murray River) in the east.

Key peoples' policy recommendations*:

Local Governments:

- Support grassroots initiatives such as the Mildura Community Water Bank (MCWB)² to ensure equitable access for small-scale agriculture, especially that of priority populations such as refugee and migrant communities.

State Governments:

- Develop planning legislation, capacity building (led by farmers) and provide financial resources for landholders to work to restore natural flows..
- Reform the Murray Darling Water trading scheme in collaboration with stakeholders and the Federal Government so farmers can access and pay a fair price for water, while eliminating water trading.

The Federal Government:

- Amend the National Water Initiative subject to investigation by the National Water Commission to thoroughly review and reform the various water trading platforms to ensure equitable access for cultural and environmental flows, and for all scales of food production.
- Reform the Murray Darling Water trading scheme in collaboration with stakeholders and State Governments so farmers can access and pay a fair price for water, while eliminating water trading.
- Legislate across all levels of government to require a voice for First Peoples in the water services they receive and recognise the cultural importance of water.

****Please refer to the Right to Food section of AFSA's Peoples' Food Plan for a full list of policy recommendations for local, state and federal government.***

² Mildura Community Water Bank, 2023

Case studies

Mildura Community Water Bank , Victoria, (Australia)

Mildura Community Water Bank (MCWB)³ is a non-profit venture that seeks to cultivate a portfolio of water rights to assist active sustainable farming, direct-to-consumer food consumption and the health of river systems. Operating through a crowdfunding model, people can donate money or water to the bank, to ensure small-scale farmers have access to sustainable water supply. Small-scale farmers can also apply for a water grant, under which they are given fixed-price, temporary water allocations that are passed on to local communities through the provision of food.

Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap, Victoria (Australia)

The Victorian Government released the *Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap*⁴ for consultation in 2022, which aims to engage with local First Peoples to co-manage and co-design state and local water policy. Through a '*restorative justice approach*', the Victorian Government presents options to return water to Traditional Owners and to increase their power in the way that water is managed. The Victorian Government will work with Traditional Owners and the water sector to strengthen the role of Traditional Owners in water planning and management and by working to return water entitlements to Traditional Owners, as water becomes available. Returning water and increasing the power and resources of Traditional Owners on Country can help to revive culture and contribute to an improved sense of identity. This process will continue to respect existing entitlements to water.

In this case, AFSA must acknowledge that there are limitations to meaningful action towards First Peoples having rightful ownership and management of water under any government policy. However, this case study seeks to illustrate a critical shift in thinking about water as a living being part of First Peoples and traditional landscapes, beyond a resource to be extracted and commodified.

³ Mildura Community Water Bank, 2023

⁴ State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2022