



Authors



Nick Clarke

# WATER SECURITY IS IMPORTANT... BUT WHAT IS IT AND HOW ARE WE PERFORMING?

December 14th 2023

Secure water supply to towns and cities is critical for human health and wellbeing, economic growth, and green and liveable communities. At best, failing to manage water security has impacts for local communities and economies, and at worst, results in a lack of water for basic human needs (often for more vulnerable parts of society), undermines livelihoods, and creates instability.

Water security is periodically highlighted as warranting greater attention, often coinciding with periods of drought when the implications are more tangible. For example, Infrastructure Australia's 2020 Infrastructure Priority List identified 'town and water security' as a national priority initiative. It also announced several specific infrastructure priorities to improve water security, as well as calling for the development of a national water security strategy.

This exemplified a chorus of comparable reports or reviews at the time, which identified the need for improved effort and co-ordination to improve urban water security. It also coincided with a period of severe drought that exposed the fragility of water supply in many towns across parts of the country, not long – in climatic terms – after the 1997-2009 millennium drought had done the same.

With the Bureau of Meteorology recently confirming a return to El Nino conditions, some regions are already experiencing dry conditions following several wetter-than-average years. Climate change is expected to exacerbate the frequency and severity of the extreme conditions

that punctuate our variable climate cycle. We know that it is a matter of time before drought once again challenges the water security of towns and cities across the country.

Despite its importance, coordinating and planning for town and city water security is challenging for a water sector that involves all levels of government, water utilities, regulators and customers. This is exacerbated because water security is inconsistently defined and understood, and planning is often approached in a fragmented or siloed manner with varying objectives and outcomes.

Consistent with the adage that you 'can't manage what you can't measure', there is an opportunity to:

1. define 'town and city water security' so there is a common and consistent understanding of what this entails
2. be able to assess and report on the status of water security across the country, as a basis for co-ordinating and prioritising improvement opportunities.

Aither worked with the Commonwealth, States and Territories to develop a *Town and City Water Security Framework*, which includes a definition and evaluation approach that could support nationally consistent assessment and reporting on water security. Implementation of the framework would help to identify emerging issues and priorities, and therefore inform planning and decision-making to deliver

improved water security outcomes. Overall, the Framework aims to help:

- raise the profile of town and city water security at various scales
- share and grow understanding of approaches for achieving town and city water security
- support efforts to improve water security planning and strategies in response to risks and issues
- build community and stakeholder confidence through transparency
- help the Commonwealth, states and territories identify

efficient investments prior to and in times of crisis.

The [Framework](#) also provides a resource that individual water businesses or departments can use to consider the robustness of their own planning and preparedness to maintain water security.

While it does not replace the more targeted planning, decision-making and investment that is required to ensure each town and city across Australia is water secure, a national picture would help to focus attention on the right places and issues. There is every indication that the challenge of maintaining water security will only become more critical over time, and we are motivated to help governments and businesses navigate this as effectively and efficiently as possible.

---

[For more Aither \(a Ricardo company\) insights visit www.aither.com.au](http://www.aither.com.au)

---