



**WALGETT ABORIGINAL MEDICAL SERVICE LIMITED**

**ACN 605 822 339 ABN 78 014 990 451**  
**37 Pitt St (P.O Box 396) WALGETT NSW 2832**  
Phone: (02) 6820 3777 Fax: (02) 68281201  
Web: [www.walgettams.com.au](http://www.walgettams.com.au)



Intake pump from Namoi River for Walgett's drinking water February 2019.  
*Photo courtesy Dharrivaa Elders Group.*



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### **ISSUES PAPER – WATER QUALITY**

In November 2018, when Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service Limited (“WAMS”) became aware of the unacceptably high level of sodium in Walgett’s drinking water, WAMS has been advocating for a desalination solution.

Dr Jacqui Webster<sup>1</sup> advised that “*The sodium levels in the Walgett water supplies are concerning*”<sup>2</sup> and explained that Walgett residents would be consuming a considerable proportion in their drinking water of the WHO 5 grams per day recommended amount of salt from food and drinks and that this would be amplified by lack of access and consumption of fresh foods which also results in higher salt intake.

She advised that high salt intake can lead to many adverse health outcomes prevalent in Aboriginal communities and that another concerning dietary risk for the community would be increasing consumption of sugary soft drinks because the water tastes salty. In January 2019 Dr Webster continued to advise:

*“If the sodium content of water is 300mg/L and people are consuming the recommended amount of water (2.5litres) than that is equivalent to 750mg/sodium per day which is more than 1/3 of the recommended daily amount of sodium (WHO Guideline is 2000mg/sodium for adults and even less for children).... As it is likely that people in Walgett are already consuming large amounts of salt from processed foods including crisps and salty snacks, the extent of the additional salt from water is of considerable concern”<sup>3</sup>.*

We know many in our community turn to sugary drinks for hydration when the water tastes bad<sup>4</sup> and that this causes obesity with its associated health risks.<sup>5</sup> The dental impacts of drinking sugary drinks further burden the body’s wellness and contribute to unacceptably high levels of dental disease particularly in the younger populations.

*“Data collected in health check programs conducted by WAMS in 2014 revealed the decay rates in Walgett children to be at least 4 times greater than the rest of New South Wales”<sup>6</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> Dr Jacqui Webster PhD, RPHNutri; Head, Public Health Advocacy and Policy Impact Centre Director, WHO CC Salt Reduction; Associate Professor, Faculty of Medicine, UNSW Sydney; Honorary Associate Professor, University of Sydney; The George Institute for Global Health | AUSTRALIA

<sup>2</sup> See Jacqui Webster’s full statement included in Dharriwaa Elders Group media statement of 30 November 2018

<https://www.dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/FinalDEGSaltWaterStatement30November2018.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Dr Jacqui Webster email to Dharriwaa Elders Group 11 January 2019

<sup>4</sup> <https://science.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/poor-water-quality-linked-sugary-drink-consumption-regional-and-remote-australia>

<sup>5</sup> <https://nacchocommunique.com/tag/katie-thurber/>

<sup>6</sup> Dr Sandra Meihubers AM, Dental Public Health Consultant



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In Walgett the dental impacts of having too many sugary drinks are made worse by the absence of fluoride in the drinking water, despite the new water treatment plant (built largely with Indigenous community designated funding) <sup>7</sup> incorporating new fluoridation works funded by the NSW Government under the Fluoridation Capital Works Program under the NSW Oral Health Capital Strategy<sup>8</sup>.

The impacts on nutrition from poor access to quality drinking water and the lack of fluoridation may directly contribute to the Walgett Aboriginal community's high chronic disease burden.

WAMS calls for the provision of drinking water kiosks in high public use areas throughout Walgett, to improve the community's access to high quality drinking water.

On the 31 August 2019 Walgett's water utility, the Walgett Shire Council (WSC), which is overseen by NSW Health Public Health Unit (Far West and Western LHD) and Dept. Planning, Industry and Environment Water Unit<sup>9</sup> issued a "Boil Water Alert"<sup>10</sup> for E-coli contamination.

This latest Walgett's water crisis was caused by the high turbidity of the stagnant, rapidly evaporating Walgett weir pool river water remaining from the last environmental water releases down the Namoi and Barwon Rivers. The Walgett water treatment plant failed to shutdown when the high turbidity water was encountered. No alternative water from the Walgett bore could be immediately sourced. Apparently switching to bore water requires more hands than are currently available while a long-term WSC water worker is on leave for 3 weeks. In the meantime, the water remains as it has been since the 20 August 2019 – a mix of 90% river water drawn from the stagnant Walgett weir pool mixed with 10% Great Artesian Basin water<sup>11</sup>.

There are no additional surface water supplies that can be released from dams upstream of Walgett to maintain levels in the Walgett weir pool. This scary fact reflects a serious failure of

<sup>7</sup> Walgett's new water treatment plant and new Namoi and Gingie Village water and sewerage infrastructure were built by The NSW Aboriginal Communities Water and Sewerage Program (ACWSP) (<https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/water-utilities/infrastructure-programs/aboriginal-communities>. Zoom into the interactive map and you will see specific information regarding the work done for Walgett's Gingie and Namoi Villages) with the National Water Security Plan for Cities and Towns (<http://www.agriculture.gov.au/water/urban/completed-programmes/national-water-security-plan>) under the COAG National Partnership on Water for the Future – COAG Strategy on Water and Wastewater in Remote Communities - Walgett (See page 8 [http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/environment/national-partnership/past/COAG\\_strategy\\_water\\_NSW\\_IP\\_2014.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/environment/national-partnership/past/COAG_strategy_water_NSW_IP_2014.pdf))

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/oralhealth/Pages/water\\_fluoridation.aspx](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/oralhealth/Pages/water_fluoridation.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/water-utilities>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.walgett.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Boil-Water-Alert-Walgett-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Phone call W. Spencer Dharriwaa Elders Group and Raju Ranjit Walgett Shire Council engineer 6/9/19



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water management. The Boil Water alert will remain until NSW Health gives the all-clear after assessing recent water testing samples.

Walgett Shire Council plans to switch Walgett's water supply to 100% Great Artesian Basin water soon and when this occurs the urgent need for desalination returns.

In the first week of September 2019 officers from NSW agencies EPA, DPI Water, Health met with WSC engineers to plan the installation of a reverse osmosis unit for the town. NSW Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator James McTavish<sup>12</sup> says "installation is tracking for the next few months"<sup>13</sup>. It has taken 9 months to see this action since WAMS and Dharriwaa Elders Group began its advocacy for higher quality drinking water.

WAMS is working on longer term solutions. We welcome the advocacy of Dr Jacqui Webster to improve the public health communications of NSW Health, and for the inclusion of a sodium health guideline in the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines. We are encouraging WSC to introduce wastewater recycling and longer term water efficiency initiatives, to lessen Walgett's impact on the health of the Barwon River and the Brewarrina, Bourke and Wilcannia communities downstream of Walgett who depend on it.

We are working with the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership to grow more food in the WAMS Community Garden using new water efficient garden beds to increase access to good nutrition for our community<sup>14</sup>. WAMS also welcomes the work of Yuwaya Ngarra-li to establish engineering graduate pathways and provision of expert advice to support WSC's engineering capacity.

WAMS calls on the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation ("NACCHO") and the Australia Medical Association ("AMA") to join our campaign to improve access to high quality drinking water in Aboriginal communities.

We recognise the significant public health benefits of providing better access to quality drinking water, and the increasing water quality needs of our vulnerable communities caused by the Climate Change health emergency<sup>15</sup> and poor water management.

### **Urgent action is required for:**

- desalination solutions for towns relying on groundwater and evaporating rivers
- potable water supplied to Aboriginal communities
- fluoridation of potable water supplies
- accessible drinking water kiosks

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nsw.gov.au/improving-nsw/projects-and-initiatives/your-town-water-in-regional-nsw/regional-town-water-supply-coordinator/>

<sup>13</sup> SMS to Wendy Spencer 5 September 2019

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/index.php/yuwayangarrali/37-yuwaya-ngarrali/168-trial-1-water-efficient-garden-beds-installed>

<sup>15</sup> <https://ama.com.au/media/climate-change-health-emergency>



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- drinking water community education campaigns conducted by ACCOs supported by quality community education resources.
- Australian Drinking Water Guidelines that include a health guideline for sodium, and no longer rely on palatability because we have discovered that the absence of a health guideline for sodium allows water utilities to tell us that the water is “safe”.
- waste water recycling and other water efficiency measures and infrastructure for remote Aboriginal communities
- greater engineering capacity in Walgett and regional and remote communities
- declaration of a Climate Emergency and requirements made of local governments for Climate Resilience Plans which incorporate measures for managing vital community water infrastructure during increasing natural disasters and water scarcity
- management of surface and groundwaters for health and wellbeing of all species

### **Some media coverage from WAMS advocacy with Dharriwaa Elders Group and the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership with UNSW<sup>16</sup> regarding Walgett’s drinking water**

ABC News Rachel Carbonell 11 December 2018, *Health expert warns residents are at risk from high sodium in water in drought-stricken NSW town of Walgett*

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-11/health-experts-warn-walgetts-water-too-high-in-salt/10599186>

Newcastle Herald David Fitzsimons 7 January, *Bottling generosity: People bring gifts of water to help quench dry, drought-hit Walgett*

<https://www.theherald.com.au/story/5838019/bottling-generosity-people-bring-gifts-of-water-to-help-quench-dry-town/>

Daily Advertiser Wagga Jessica McLaughlin 11 January 2019, *Waqqa community donates hundreds of water bottles to Walgett amid drought*

<https://www.dailyadvertiser.com.au/story/5846458/community-unites-to-supply-drought-stricken-town-with-water/>

ABC 7.30 Michael Vincent 19 January 2019, *Walgett has two rivers but no water left to drink*

<https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-19/walgett-has-two-rivers-but-no-water-left-to-drink/10558428?pfmredir=sm>

News.com.au Miranda Wood 20 January 2019, *Portable desal plant to be brought to Walgett to give access to water*

<https://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/walgett-running-out-of-water-as-drought-continues-in-country-nsw/news-story/eb1e1b9e6b86192df703d2373afe84a4#.dqs5y>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/index.php/yuwayangarrali>



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The Guardian Lorena Allam, Carly Earl 22 January 2019, *For centuries the rivers sustained Aboriginal culture. Now they are dry, elders despair*

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jan/22/murray-darling-river-aboriginal-culture-dry-elders-despair-walgett>

The Land Samantha Townsend 5 February 2019, Deputy Premier Barilaro statements in NSW Government vows clean drinking water for Menindee residents after fish kill

<https://www.theland.com.au/story/5886598/barilaro-vows-menindee-will-have-clean-drinking-water/?cs=4951>

ABC News Rachel Carbonell 22 July 2019, *Saltwater solution for drought towns battling brackish drinking water*

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-22/saltwater-solution-for-drought-towns-brackish-drinking-water/11326154>

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/am/drought-affected-inland-communities-to-get-desalination-plants/11330138>



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