

## **Justice in water re-allocation in Australia: A psychological approach**

**Dr. Geoffrey J. Syme and Blair E. Nancarrow**

The following abstract is of a colloquium presented to the Department of Psychology at the University of Trier on 21/11/2000 by Dr. Geoffrey Syme and Blair Nancarrow of CSIRO's Australian Research Centre for Water in Society (ARCWIS), Perth, WA. As director of ARCWIS Dr. Geoffrey J. Syme and his team are specialized in institutional, organizational and community analysis of water related policy and its implementation and evaluation. Blair E. Nancarrow as the operational manager of the Australian Research Centre for Water in Society is responsible for the design and management of large scale and national projects. Their work includes research in the field of perceived justice in public involvement programs especially of water allocation and re-allocation processes in Australia. The talk summarized a variety of studies relating to fairness in natural resource allocation policy. These have been conducted over the last decade. The CSIRO researchers also used the trip to Trier to discuss and develop ongoing collaborative research with PD Dr. Elisabeth Kals and Prof. Dr. Leo Montada.

### **Abstract:**

"Australia is facing an increasing problem of competition for access to water. Early settlers had assumed that there would be plenty for everyone. However, in recent years, environmental degradation has been caused by the overuse of many of Australia's major water resources for agricultural irrigation and other industrial and development purposes. This has caused conflict between different States in Australia, and among a wide variety of interest groups. The Federal Government has responded by mounting a nationwide water reform program to provide for environmental (in-stream) flows, efficient use of water through economic market mechanisms, and where necessary, re-allocation to bring surface water and groundwater use back to sustainable levels. In some cases, this re-allocation could result in substantial hardship for individual irrigators and their rural communities.

While there is much political rhetoric declaring that this adjustment will be undertaken equitably, there is considerable confusion as to what this means. The available water law has, until now, been based on British common law, and has had difficulty in coping with the "public interest". There is also substantial confusion on how justice can be incorporated into the rules of the economic market, and even whether it should be a consideration. Finally, the role of social impact assessment in interpreting and evaluating the outcome of water reform is confused.

In this presentation it was described how the elements of a fairness heuristic were derived from community research to evaluate the justice considerations associated with a major groundwater re-allocation. The issues associated with incorporating this empirical research into government re-allocation policy are discussed in association with the role of psychologists in this area."