

# Follow the money, then follow the water



West Byron after rain, August 2014. Photo Mary Gardner

## **Mary Gardner**

Follow the money? This time, it leads to the recent state decision to rezone West Byron and construct over 1,100 buildings on 65.5 hectares of drained swamp.

But much more important is to follow the water. Three types of surface waters flow in Byron Bay. The first is rainwater. The second is the sea. The third is the water flow that we rely on now that we have given up on using natural springs and wells: our tap water and sewerage system.

Back in 2004, a lot of scientific, Council and community work finally developed a plan to live with all this water. The ten-year plan, based on the ecology of local wetlands, would treat stormwater pollution, ease flooding and treat sewage and wastewater without any outfall pipes into the ocean. The feeling was construction in West Byron had to wait and see. By 2014, this plan is still incomplete, but that construction is approved.

Standard calculations estimate 240 litres are needed per person per day. Water leaves each sink and toilet to enter sewerage pipes to be pumped by 40 different stations to the sewage treatment plant (STP) behind the sports centre. The STP is designed to accept an inflow of seven megalitres a day. Based on figures since 2012, it's accepting 73 per cent of that total

capacity. This daily flow is constant, rain or shine. Where there is inflow, there must be an outflow.

The STP is a prize-winner, combining engineering and ecology in a custom-tailored design to fit the catchment. Right now it is still a work in progress. Two of three stages have been created.

### **Network incomplete**

The first stage is the constructed plant which accepts all the sewage and does the treatment to a high standard. The second stage is the redistribution of the effluent, the outflow. The redistribution is to happen in three ways. Only part of that redistribution network has ever been completed.

The first part is a system that uses effluent to water golf courses and sports fields. The second is effluent available for use by nearby farms. The third is the construction and regeneration of wetlands, starting with less than fifty hectares near the STP. These also grow paperbark trees while supporting birds and other wildlife. So what is the delay?

The 2004 plan linked the treatment of stormwater and flood protection with the regeneration of the same wetlands. Rooftops, driveways and roads hurry rainfall down pipes to drains that all lead to the Belongil Estuary. As it travels it washes exhaust and other pollutants into the estuary and sea. Through town, it gets backed up around the Clock Tower, the lowest point. Eventually, it gets through the Butler Street drain.

### **Slowing water**

The western industrial area has similar problems. To slow the water, rain tanks were planned for every roof. To slow and clean water, tiny wetlands and other water-sensitive designs were planned for Sandhills and other places in town and the industrial estate.

The West Byron drains, having been transformed into wetlands, would be great sponges, as well as wildlife havens. They could better accommodate not only stormwater but also great surges of stormy seawater. These go up the estuary, compounding flooding.

But the drains remain grassy channels. They crisscross paddocks of acid sulfate soils, carrying more effluent than was originally planned to the estuary. A new flood plan, brought to Council in November, wants levees and pumps installed along Butler Street. Slowing the rain with tanks is not a priority. Only one water-sensitive-design parklet, at Sandhills, is suggested.

### **Behind schedule**

The regeneration of wetlands and other water-sensitive designs remain critical to handling all three types of water flow. Without them, the 2004 plan to reuse the STP effluent is way behind schedule. The inflow capacity is growing, but the redistribution of outflow is not. How is it that our vital community infrastructure is left incomplete for a decade while private mega-development is fast-tracked?

Water will trump money. It's an honest fact of coastal living. Let's start again from where we left off.

**By Mary Gardner**

**Source:** <http://www.echo.net.au/2014/12/follow-money-follow-water/>