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Jim Bentley Opinion Piece

LEARNING TOGETHER TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

Hunter school students impressed water industry professionals recently, demonstrating their innovative, imaginative and achievable solutions to water challenges.

'Learning Together to Change Our World' was a first-of-its-kind programme for the Australian water industry, which saw students develop forward-thinking ideas to conserve water. The programme brought together students from New Lambton Public School, Mayfield West Demonstration School and Hunter Sports High.

These kids showed us all that solutions to community challenges are best found when we work together.

From the design of an inflatable pool to capture and recycle water used when washing the car, to a Bluetooth shower head to monitor the length of a shower, it was wonderful to see students work collaboratively to save water.

The programme was part of Hunter Water's commitment to learn with our community as we plan for our region's long term water future.

Water is one of the planet's most precious resources, with more than 40 per cent of our global population experiencing water scarcity, and 4 billion people without access to basic sanitation services such as toilets.

While we're fortunate our water storages are in a good position in the Lower Hunter, it is important we protect this finite resource by managing our supplies well and using it wisely, in order to remain in this position. Managing water efficiently will also have other benefits, both financial and environmental, and reduce our carbon footprint.

Hunter Sports High students impressed our staff and partners in delivering water savings at their school, while identifying and funding new technology to provide safe drinking water to developing countries. In addition to their project, they raised enough money to fund 24 water filtration units for people in Uganda and Kenya, with each unit providing clean drinking water for 100 people for a year. It is really wonderful to see young people taking the initiative to improve our world.

The leadership of our young people will be crucial as our global community works together to achieve the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Hunter Water is committed to playing its part to realise the goals in partnership with the Australian water industry and our local community.

To manage water efficiently in Australia, we need to address uncertainties like climate change, population growth and advances in technology, as well as more acute stresses such as drought. Hunter Water aims to learn with our community to create a resilient water system

for our region, one which is robust and adaptive to uncertainties and protects our environment, while continuing to provide high quality, affordable services.

We can only achieve a resilient and sustainable water future by working together as a community to value our precious resource. I'm really encouraged by the ways in which people are embracing the Love Water message. My thanks to all for the measures you are taking at home and in your businesses to conserve water and make every drop count. It's the small things we change, that together, can make a big difference.

While it is still early, there are signs behaviour change is contributing to a reduction in our water consumption. Our modelling suggests that our customers are using 3 to 4 per cent less than they otherwise would have been, when climate considerations are removed from the picture. This is a step in the right direction as we work to extend the time between now and when we need to make a decision on our long term future. Far too often, the solution is to build expensive infrastructure, which is not always in the best interests of the community.

Our community's effort to save water has helped us provide support to farmers in the Upper Hunter who are experiencing some of the toughest drought conditions in the state. Since August last year, we've provided more than 1.3 million litres of drinking water to properties in need, with the assistance of partnering councils.

As part of our commitment to Love Water, Hunter Water is working to reduce losses from its water network. Over the past two years we've significantly increased our active leak detection work, utilised smart technology systems to detect hard-to-find leaks and reprioritised customer reported leaks. So far we've reduced leakage by nearly 20 per cent, and while I'm encouraged by the progress we are making, we will continue to invest in this area and focus on making further improvements.

Looking to the year ahead, we will continue to transform our organisation to deliver on the aspirations of our region. Care for our customers drives us to work together with our partners and other organisations to achieve the best customer outcomes and play our part to enable the sustainable growth and development of the Lower Hunter.

Whether it be through water conservation initiatives, education programmes to learn with the next generation, changing processes to enable good development or faster responses to our customers - shaping our region's future involves making decisions today that will create a better tomorrow. I'm sure 2019 will bring with it both challenges and triumphs, but I have no doubt that by learning together we can change our world.

JIM BENTLEY
Managing Director, Hunter Water