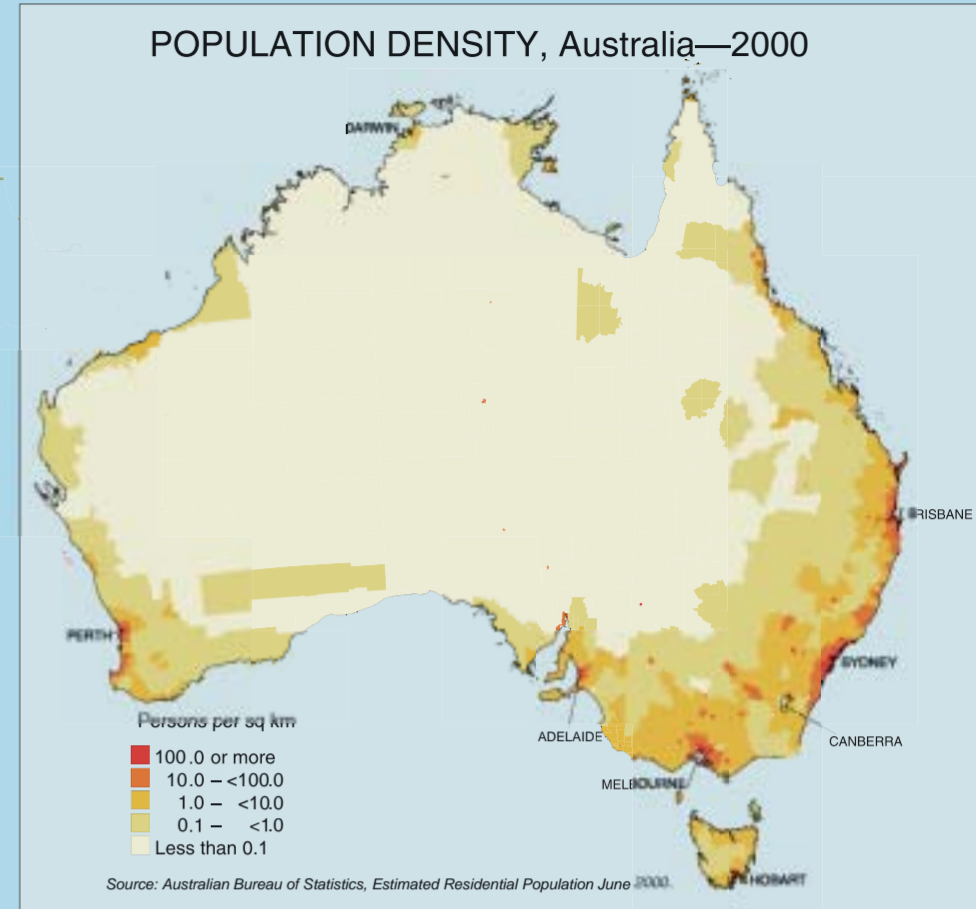
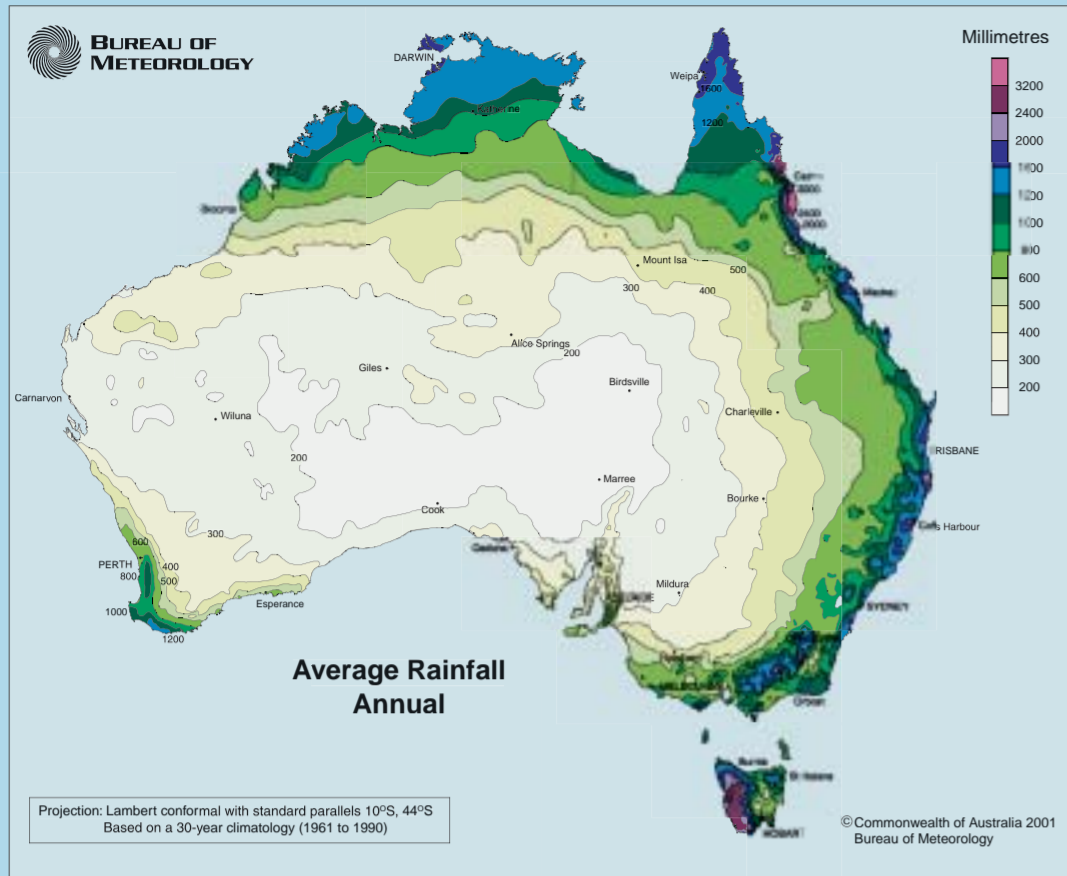


Australia's Water Problems



WA Wheat Belt. The WA Wheat Belt was hit by floods, as well as the worst drought in decades, in 2000-2001. This savaged the agricultural sector, which had huge numbers of farm foreclosures and a high rate of suicides in 2000-2001, though yields and prices were better for 2001-2002. WA produces one-third to one-half of Australia's wheat crop.

Perth. As of August 2001, water storage levels were at their lowest since 1962, with Perth's seven main dams filled only to 26.3% of capacity. Water restrictions are an increasing reality in Perth and some regional areas. Perth's water supply comes from dams in the Darling Range east of the city, and from an increasing reliance on ground water, which provided 52% of the supply in 2000, as opposed to only 40% just three years earlier; a still higher percentage is planned for the future. Many ground water supplies (such as artesian basins) are not inexhaustible, as once believed.

Kalgoorlie-Boulder Area. In the Kalgoorlie-Boulder area, the shortage of water (most of which comes through the Mundaring-Kalgoorlie pipeline) is already restricting development. Severe shortfalls are predicted over the next decade for this area, which is home to over 70 mining companies. The Australian of August 18, 2000 noted, "Proposed projects would dwarf the supply that flows from the century-old pipeline from the coast."

Adelaide. In normal years, Adelaide relies on the Murray River for 40% of its water, and on local catchments for 60%; however, in dry years, the latter may supply little or no water, so the city is almost entirely dependent on the Murray, which, before the Snowy Scheme was built, sometimes ran dry before reaching Adelaide. Much of the rest of South Australia is extremely dry, with 83% classed as arid, 14% as semi-arid, and only 3-4% receiving an average rainfall exceeding 508mm per year.

Northwest Victoria. Victoria in 2001 entered its fifth year of drought. Conditions in the northwest part of the state were the worst recorded in over 50 years. As of August, the Wimmera-Mallee catchment system held just 11% of capacity, and 55 of the area's 74 towns were on water restrictions. Wimmera-Mallee Catchment Authority system controller John Martin told the *Herald Sun* on Aug. 2, "Four of our reservoirs are completely dry... We're talking puddles in the bottom of our largest dams... Certainly it's the worst drought since 1944." Additionally, due to water "reforms", hundreds of farmers have been hit with price rises for water of up to \$1700 per year.

Queensland. A severe drought gripped northern NSW and most of Qld. from 1991 until 1995, and parts of central Qld. until 1996. Several major reservoirs in both states went entirely dry. Losses were a staggering \$5 billion in 1997 prices. Drought also afflicted many producers in SE Qld. in 2000-2001, particularly on the Darling Downs, one of the state's richest agricultural areas.

Bundaberg/Hervey Bay. The Bundaberg/Hervey Bay area has been subject to chronic water shortages.

Brisbane. As of 1996, southeastern Queensland, including Brisbane, was expected to run short of water by 2015, according to Brisbane's water and sewerage department. Instead of planning to expand supplies, a shift was made to "full user pays and full cost pricing" (i.e. gouging the consumer) which is expected to stretch supplies to 2030. In November 2001, the Queensland state government slapped a cap on water extraction from dams, rivers and springs between Brisbane and the NSW border until early 2003. The *Courier Mail* of Nov. 21, 2001 reported that "Four dams, approved by government 10 years ago, remain on the drawing board amid concerns that the Gold Coast and Beaudesert would run short of water after 2010."

Murray-Darling Basin. The Murray-Darling Basin covers one-seventh of Australia. It produces 40% of all Australia's agriculture, and comprises 75% of its irrigated acreage, with an estimated worth of at least \$16 billion in both direct and processed output. Much of the water infrastructure of the Basin, such as dams, weirs, irrigation channels, etc. dates back to the 1920s and 1930s, and needs major maintenance, or even replacement. In June 1995, the Murray-Darling Commission suddenly set a cap on water usage at a lower level than existing usage, while NSW cut back by up to an additional 10%; these "reforms" devastated many agricultural producers.

New South Wales. Horrific flooding covered over one-third of NSW from Nov. 2000 to March 2001, causing over \$1.25 billion in losses, and a near-disaster in Grafton (near where the Clarence River empties into the Pacific Ocean), where 12,000 people were evacuated. The 2000-2001 floods followed serious urban flooding in Nyngan (1990), Inverell (1991), Coffs Harbour (1996), Bathurst and Wollongong (1998), and severe, widespread flooding in the northwest (1990, 1998), along the Murray (1993), and on the north coast (1996). A severe drought gripped northern NSW from 1991-95.

Sydney. For six weeks in 1998, terrified Sydney residents had to boil their tap water, or drink potentially deadly doses of cryptosporidium and giardia, widely believed to have been unleashed by the corporatisation and consequent cost-cutting of Sydney Water. Even though the Sydney region is subject to extended periods of drought with periodic water restriction, and Sydney is expected to grow by 700,000 people over the next 20 years, Sydney Water has no plans to build any new dams.

Victoria. In a mid-2001 report, the Auditor-General of Victoria "discovered 23 dams in need of urgent repair to meet national safety guidelines", and that "repair works on some of the largest country dams in Victoria would not be completed until 2007," reported *The Age* of June 2, 2001. Many of the dams are over 100 years old.

Melbourne. The city was placed under water restrictions in 2001, with demand expected to overtake presently available supplies by 2012, according to a June 2001 joint discussion paper issued by Melbourne Water and the Victorian Government. The paper warned of escalating restrictions and higher water prices over the years ahead, especially given that Melbourne Water and the state of Victoria have "no current plans for seeking new water resources." As of late 2001, Melbourne's water storage was less than 50% of capacity.

Tasmania. Tasmania suffered from severe drought into late 2001, which necessitated water restrictions in some areas.

Australia is one of the Earth's driest places, with the largest desert area outside of the Sahara Desert in Africa. Because of the rainfall patterns (see Average Annual Rainfall map, upper left), the population has been mainly confined to narrow strips along portions of the coast (see Population Density, Australia-2000 map, upper right) leaving much of our vast continent almost uninhabited. However, as the *Macquarie Illustrated World Atlas* points out, "On a per capita basis, few countries in the world are so favourably endowed", if we just decide to use our enormous, but ill-distributed, water supplies. (See Map 2 on opposite side, "New Great Water Projects") Most of our water problems are man-made, resulting from lack of development, failure to maintain such water infrastructure as we have (including measures to deal with salinity problems), or the suicidal lunacy known as "competition policy" and its associated "water reforms".

