

# POOLING RESOURCES: UNITING AND COLLABORATING WITH THE REGIONAL WATER SECTOR THROUGH THE REGIONAL CHAMPIONS INITIATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

Regional water professionals face unique challenges and opportunities compared to metro-based professionals. Working in regional areas often requires covering large physical distances, managing multiple supplies, diverse communities with differing water needs, multiple skillsets, and limited resources. This requires versatility rather than specialising in one area. These challenges create opportunities to support, collaborate with, and learn from other regions.

The AWA NSW Regional Water Champions initiative provides opportunities to foster learning, increase visibility and strengthen relationships by promoting engagement among regional members. This can improve talent retention through enhanced industry experiences, regardless of location. Knowledge sharing of water technology, standards, policies, and innovations is promoted through interactive events which facilitate connections.

The Regional Water Champions have successfully hosted multi-hub events through a regional engagement model:

- The 'YWP Regional Water Night' highlighted similarities and differences between regional and metro-based professionals. The multi-hub concept was proven with over eighty attendees at physical hubs in Newcastle, Taree, Sydney, Canberra, as well as a large online presence.
- Virtual hackathon facilitated teams to 'hack' solutions to regional water challenges
- Conference-based workshops in a debate format at the AWA NSW State Conference and Ozwater.
- Multi-hub storytelling event hosting three speakers sharing experiences from regional NSW in extreme events and how this has shaped their water journey.
- Interstate, multi-hub event sharing Indigenous perspectives in water, with speakers from Newcastle, Alice Springs, and the Dharriwaa Elders Group (Walgett).

Feedback from events has been positive: providing connection with others, networking opportunities, quality two-way communication, inclusion, and expression of Indigenous perspectives. Added benefits from these events include spotlighting regional members and the focussing of future event planning on key regional water issues. That said, a significant challenge to regional outreach has been technology, with hubs experiencing interruptions, and feedback; that participants find it more engaging when speakers present from hubs, rather than online. These lessons learnt and feedback strengthen future events.

The success of these initiatives stem from leveraging Regional Champions networks, facilitating events that allow attendees to connect with other AWA members and that foster dialogue and collaboration. This extends the reach of the AWA, enhances membership value and inclusivity regardless of location with multi-hub events proven to promote connections and shared learning, expanding networks, and widely disseminating knowledge.

This initiative has proven a successful framework for hosting regional events, increased connections across the water industry, promoted greater awareness of regional water challenges and opportunities and increased member benefits.