

Water pricing linked to well-being of older Australians

La Trobe University researchers say there is an important link between water pricing and availability and the health and wellbeing of older residents of small rural communities.



Credit: Anne Clark/istockphoto

‘Affordable water is absolutely essential to the health and wellbeing of rural seniors and their communities,’ says Professor Jeni Warburton.

‘This group is generally very knowledgeable about local hydrology and water conservation. They already use water at meagre levels.’

Her colleague, Dr Maureen Rogers adds: ‘Water is very important to their health and wellbeing—from maintaining gardens and self-sufficiency in fresh vegetables, managing stress and emotional hardship, and maintaining an active and positive life and being socially engaged.’

‘Issues surrounding the cost of water are also prevalent for those who have poor health or disabilities as some participants expressed concerns about not being able to modify rented housing,’ she says.

The La Trobe study was undertaken in the north-eastern Victorian towns of Tallangatta, Chiltern, Walla and Yackandandah with local seniors generally aged 65 years and older.

Dr Sue O’Keefe, La Trobe Albury-Wodonga Centre for Water Policy and Management, comments: ‘If water pricing strategies are about achieving water conservation through changed water behaviour, this group of water conservationists are not likely to be greatly influenced, since they already use water at meagre levels.’

‘However, the cost of urban water is a central concern as it can place added pressure on those who are unable to modify

their water usage due to their particular physical needs or those who are unable to adapt their home environment because of cost or if they are renting.'

Group discussions conducted with close to 40 participants showed that the price of water, rather than water availability, has the greatest impact on their ability to remain active participants in the community as most were on fixed incomes. Water-pricing structures may produce unintended consequences for this group.

'Rural seniors play an important part in the sustainability of rural communities, they continue to make an important contribution to the understanding of water conservation, and there is much to be gained from actively supporting their ability to age well,' says Professor Warburton.

'While extreme events such as heat waves can affect the most vulnerable in our communities, rural seniors are not necessarily vulnerable to the vagaries of water availability. They are, however, vulnerable to policy decisions which increase costs causing the greatest impact on their ability to live active and engaged lives,' concludes Dr O'Keefe.

Source: La Trobe University

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