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Committee Secretary,
Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport
PO Box 1600, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600

Submission to the Inquiry on the Management of the Murray Darling Basin

The preliminary stages to developing a centralized plan for the Murray Darling Basin have exhibited unfortunate policy failures which could compromise future policy success. The symptoms of failure include significant social disagreement, which has led to reactive political responses, which have, perversely, accentuated rather than addressed the pervasive disagreements. The causes of failure include:

- 1) A “consultation” phase which was both inadequately strategized and/or inappropriately named. If this had been intended to be consultation then it was certainly inadequately crafted, for it was a *presentation* that was provided to attendees, *not* consultation. The result of such a clumsily planned and executed exercise has been further distrust and disengagement toward government. For example, at the Narrabri meeting one attendee was motivated to say that the speaker’s “credibility is as low as the lowest rock in the wall.” (The trust and community engagement issues are further addressed in the solutions section below); and
- 2) An over-reliance on selective scientific evidence without adequate consideration of the political (not to mention social and environmental) effects of relying on data with inherent and inadequately explained uncertainty. The result of such inappropriate reliance has been to make the Plan vulnerable to attacks from those critical of the Plan, especially by those who have lifelong (and longer) personal knowledge of the operation of the river in particular locations. When the science underpinning the SDLs is undermined so is the Plan, as is the trust able to be generated for those seeking to implement the Plan. For example, at the Narrabri meeting one attendee made the point that potentially high social impacts should not be generated by decisions based on refutable evidence. (The evidence issue is addressed in the solutions section below).

The solutions to these failures are to:

- 1) Engage in meaningful public engagement with the *public* (not just vested interest stakeholders) which would ideally include the co-creation of policy goals as well as implementation strategies. There are many examples of successful co-regulatory “private-public partnerships”, too numerous to mention here. The academic literature is also extensive and rich and a useful starting point would be Arnstein, 1969. The research suggests that *if* people are meaningfully engaged then they are more likely to accept policy decisions, *even if* they are individually disadvantaged. Furthermore these processes nurture trust, which is essential for policy success (full and further references may be supplied on request); and
- 2) Incorporate a much wider range of evidence to underpin the Plan, drawing on oral history, Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural memory, experiential stories and archival documentation. The use of multiple sources of evidence from a wider range of disciplines would not only tease out the local geographical and social nuances but could also be used to support the SDLs - rather than relying solely on apparently indisputable quantitative science, which on closer inspection (and as the MDBA acknowledged at the recent Technical Briefing in Canberra) may reveal itself to be doubtful. This would provide a much stronger and more respectable evidential underpinning for the Plan which would also support the generation of trust. The process of collecting such data and information would also build trust. There is also a wealth of existing data which could be usefully mined.

It should be apparent that these solutions overlap and are mutually supportive.

We would like to extend our thanks for the opportunity to provide comment, and wish the Committee well in its deliberations,