Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport

The management of the Murray-Darling Basin

Environmental Farmers Network (EFN) submission

EFN represents farmers in Southeast Australia interested in sustainable farming in a social, environmental and economic sense. We represent mostly commercial farmers very concerned about the impact of climate change on farms, people and landscapes, loss of farm biodiversity and the impact of peri-urban development on farming. The Environmental Farmers Network gives voice to a growing number of farmers dedicated to the environmental health of rural regions whose views are not being represented by traditional farmer organizations.

We strongly encourage the Federal Parliament to support the development of the Basin Plan by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority as outlined in the Water Act 2007.

Key Submission Messages

1. Over-allocation of water resources and the deteriorating health of the river system are indisputable. At risk is the Basin's productive capacity based on the services provided by it's natural environment

2. The Water Act was designed to give the environment precedence to bring the environment up to par with social and economic considerations in the Basin. This was the basic intent of the Act.

3. The 3000 GL to 4000 GL scenarios are minimal responses and will need future review and adaptive management.

4. Traditional triple bottom line planning will not ensure Basin sustainability.

5. Buying from willing sellers is an option, but not the best option.

6. The management and delivery of environmental water reserve must maximise outcomes for the environment and Basin productivity.

7. The Basin Plan must be promoted as a positive, an imperative for the future prosperity of rural communities.

1. We need to act to protect our riverine environment and the productive capacity of the Murray Darling Basin. It is common knowledge that the Basin's Rivers are in poor condition; the 80% decline in waterbird numbers since 1983, the loss of native fish numbers compared to pre-development levels, 16 of 36 fish species threatened, the decline of River Red Gum health and increased water quality problems with blue-green

algal blooms.

Less understood is the need for salt disposal and the flushing capacity required for not only water quality with-in stream but also to maintain critical salt balance with-in irrigation areas. Salt loads in the Murray in SA are about 5000t/day. If the mouth is blocked this accumulates in the lower reaches and then upstream. The Victorian irrigation areas have been unable to export salt for over a decade due to lack of winter flows in the Murray River.

There is real possibility of environmental failure, the collapse of rural communities and the productive capacity of irrigation areas in the Basin.

2. We believe the Water Act reflects the stated intent of all political parties, has had bi-partisan support of two parliaments and correctly gives initial precedence to the environmental requirements to maintain a healthy sustainable river system.
An analysis of benefits and impacts on social and economic values of not only all three scenarios in the Guide to the Basin Plan, but also higher levels up to and including 7600GL should BE carried out as part of the plan following a determination of an initial minimum volume of environmental water required.

It is anticipated the Government of the day will assess the Basin Plan produced by the Authority, it be debated in Parliament and finally legislation passed and enacted. Hopefully with bipartisan support.

3. The 3000GL to 4000GL scenarios being promoted in the Guide to the Basin Plan appears a minimum volume required and would need to be adaptively managed and reviewed as the effects of Climate Change become more evident. This scenario relies on a return to higher rainfall patterns, a minimal change in climate and would need to be reviewed within a five year period.

4. The popular call for a triple bottom line approach to the production of the Basin Plan puts at risk the natural resource base that rural communities and economies rely on. The intent of the Act is to bring the environment up to par with social and economic considerations in the Basin

5. The current policy of buying water from willing sellers has the potential to both lessen the productive capacity of the Basin and also adversely impact the viability of irrigators and rural communities. Victorian examples of water savings from both on-farm and infrastructure remodeling projects combined with targeted buybacks have retained economic outputs and are preferable to purchases from willing sellers.
As part of the adjustment/transition programs there should be research and development projects focused in increasing productivity - aiming for twice the production using half the water on half the land.

6. The environmental outputs from the Environmental Water Reserve should be

enhanced by close working relationships with water delivery Authorities, the ability of the Reserve to trade on the temporary water market and the use of engineering options.

7. We urge political leaders to present the Basin Plan as the environmental, social and economic positive it undoubtedly is for Murray Darling Basin. The process set out in the Act needs to be clearly outlined to basin communities including the political process post delivery of the plan to Government.
The intent of the Plan was correct in 2007, the need has been magnified following experiences since that date and the benefits of planning for the long term rather than short term expediency needs to be promoted.

John Pettigrew
Spokesperson for Environmental Farmers Network
150 Maneroo Road, Bunbartha. Phone 03 5826 9557
www.environmentalfarmersnetwork.net.au