

**Submission Number: 169**  
**Date Received: 13/12/2010**

Sc

9<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

Dear members of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia,

I wish to submit my concern to you about the proposed buy backs and reductions in water allocations that are outlined in your latest plan for the Murray Darling catchment.

I base my concerns on my scientific background and what I have learned living in this river catchment over many years.

I feel you should pay great attention to views from outside Australia that are liable to have an unbiased position in this matter. In particular I want you to consider the opinion of John Briscoe the Professor of the Practice of Environmental Engineering at Harvard University and former head of water at the World Bank. I understand that he has already given his views to the MDBA concerning the plan but I feel the views he has expressed publically are very important and should be repeated.

Professor Biscoe has a positive outlook for the Murray Darling catchment because he believes that Australia leads the world in water management. He quotes as evidence of Australia's good water management the experience of the recent drought in the basin and the fact that production in agriculture (though diversification) was not significantly reduced overall. I agree with him and would give emphasis to the word management because we must manage the river and get away from the idea that we can restore it to some romantic pristine condition that has not been accurately described or defined and is covered under the words *a healthy river*. Of course we must consider the flora and fauna that live in the basin and their health but as Professor Biscoe pointed out the river is not a natural river but is managed and engineered from source to sea. Due to dams and the needs of agriculture the natural flows in much of the basin have been reversed many of the rivers being held with high water levels in the summer and with reduced levels in the winter. This has undoubtedly affected the ecology of the river and the life cycle of some of the species dependent on it but the clock cannot and should not be turned back. What the rivers need is good management not restoration to an ill defined, so called, state of health. This is not to say that environmental considerations are not important as many farmers recognise but these considerations must be balanced as John Biscoe says with social and economic ones including the need for irrigated agricultural production.

Professor Briscoe is correct when he states that the science behind river management is new and leaves many issues unanswered. Because of this uncertainty drastic changes can often have effects that are negative and unintended especially when rivers have been altered from their original form. We need wetlands for our flora and fauna on the rivers but in their unrestricted past these rivers flooded and moved over their floodplains (as their deposits

show) and were not restricted by levees or mitigation lakes. We should safeguard wetlands but we cannot return to uncontrolled natural river flooding and the extensive wandering of river beds over their floodplains. We should also be aware that extensive wetlands are a significant producer of methane originally known as marsh gas which is a significant greenhouse gas and can add to global warming.

Issues are complex and solutions must take human interests into account. Once humankind began using agriculture ecosystems were altered and complete restoration was not possible. Even hunter gatherer societies altered their environments. The environments of some countries such as England, now considered natural and worthy of preservation, are in fact totally artificial human altered systems.

Yet environments can be managed successfully and ecological issues can be given consideration as long as a sense of proportion is observed and we are free of utopian ideas of restoration of a past that is incompatible with human endeavours.

It is a balance between environmental, social and economic concerns that we need. To put environmental considerations that are based on the rivers being restored to some pre-agricultural condition as a priority is incorrect because given what has already happened such ideas cannot be put into effect. Such prioritisation is also harmful to legitimate human interests. This approach is utopian romantic and misguided. Rather than have environmental concerns given priority they should only be one factor in an equally weighed approach to all the factors involved in river management.

The recent problems in the Murray Darling Basin have, as John Briscoe says, been misdiagnosed. The shortage of water has been due, not to mismanagement but to the drought, that is to climate change from whatever cause. The recent floods have also been due to climate change and what the future holds in this regard is indeterminable. But whatever it may be the future can be managed and if extreme ideas of restoring the river to an undefined health or a natural state are abandoned environmental considerations can be given their due weight along with social and agricultural issues.

I appeal to you to take a balanced position which will not disadvantage the residents of this river basin or the welfare of Australia as a whole.

Yours,

Lewis Wilson B.Sc (Hons).