

Hon. Tony Windsor, MP  
Chairman  
House of Representatives Regional Australia Committee

9/12/2010

**Submission Number: 175**  
**Date Received: 13/12/2010**

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Dear Sir,

### **Murray Darling Basin Plan**

The Wimmera Irrigators Association questions the determined outcomes for the Wimmera-Avoca Region of the Murray Darling Basin Plan. The Association is of the opinion that they don't correctly reflect the previously documented state of the environment (rivers, wetlands, etc) within the region.

In Volume 1 – Overview of the Murray Darling Basin Plan the key rivers of the Wimmera-Avoca Region, the Wimmera and the Avoca Rivers along with associated wetlands are identified as being in a "Very Poor" state according to Table 2.2 on Page 18 from an ecosystem health assessment perspective.

The Wimmera River is considered to be "Poor" whilst the Avoca River is considered to be "Moderate to Good" from a hydrologic health assessment perspective (Table 2.3 – Page 18).

The above assessments have been supported in numerous state and regional environmental assessment reports compiled over the past decade or more.

Figure 6.6 – Page 68 suggests that at current level of use the Wimmera-Avoca Region based on end-of-system flows is 43% available to the environment. However with no water recovery being sought within the Wimmera-Avoca Region, but with recovery of 3,000 GL across the Murray Darling Basin the end-of-system flows will increase from 43% to 74%. Without time to study the underlying data this appears to be an illusionary conclusion.

At the end of the stressed Wimmera River are the terminal lakes Lake Hindmarsh and the RAMSAR-listed wetland Lake Albacutya (Table 2.1 – Page 17).

Despite the return of some 40,000 ML of former consumptive (Urban and Stock and Domestic) water to the environment as the result of savings in distribution losses through the recent implementation of the Wimmera Mallee and Northern Mallee pipeline projects over the past decade or more the Basin Plan surprisingly suggests that no additional water needs to be recovered on behalf of the environment.

Due to a succession of years where no irrigation water was available for use or the level of annual allocations were extremely low Wimmera irrigators decided some 12 months ago to close the Wimmera Irrigation System in preference to modernisation/rationalisation of the system and offer

the irrigation entitlement, 28,000 ML (which includes distribution losses), to the Federal Government for purchase on behalf of the environment.

Wimmera irrigators offered their water to the Federal Government through the Department for the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts' (DEWHA) "Irrigator-led Group Proposal" process. The first proposal was submitted in November 2009 and was eventually rejected in late April 2010 because our asking price of \$1,600.00/ML was not considered to "not represent value for money for Australian taxpayers". A second proposal of \$1,100/ML was subsequently submitted and was once again rejected in September 2010. Both processes involved considerable time and energy on behalf the volunteer irrigation representatives plus considerable cost in the first instance through the engagement of consultants to assist with preparation of the Proposal details and the required supporting documentation.

Prior to the release of the MD Basin Plan Wimmera irrigators were informed by DEWHA that the Government would be interested in receiving another Proposal at a lower price if irrigators were in agreement. Irrigators waited until the release of the Basin Plan in the belief that the "science" would further support their case, subsequently Wimmera irrigators have been informed by DEWHA that due to the "changed science contained within the Basin Plan" the Government is no longer interested in receiving a Proposal from Wimmera irrigators to close their irrigation system down and to sell their water to the Commonwealth.

Local irrigators, the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority and other environmentally focussed organisations find it extremely difficult to understand how the long term science has suddenly changed with the recognition that about 40,000 ML of returned savings to the environment is now occurring due to the completion of the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project. The terminal lakes between them have requirement of 821,000 ML just to initially fill them, let alone maintain an environmentally beneficial volume even if just for the short term. Irrigators are of the belief that the return of 40,000ML to the environment will not be able to meet the region's long term environmental objectives such as seeking to retain water in the terminal lakes for a longer period.

So unlike many other regions within the Murray Darling Basin Wimmera irrigators are, at the moment, willing sellers to the Commonwealth but are faced with an unwilling buyer. This appears to discriminate against Wimmera irrigators when compared to other irrigators located within the Basin.

Wimmera irrigators also feel discriminated against by DEWHA through the following

- That irrigation water purchased, for the environment, via an Irrigator-led Proposal is/can be valued at a lower amount (refer to attached response from DEWHA dated 25 November 2010) than water purchased for the environment via savings achieved through a capital works project e.g. the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project where all stakeholders agreed to a value of approximately \$2,750/ML for water returned to the environment.
- That even though our region is considered to be part of the Murray Darling Basin it appears as though it may also be excluded from seeking funding from the Commonwealth to modernise our irrigation system if a sale and closure of our system cannot be secured.

- That the Irrigator-led Proposal process provides no opportunity for seeking a second opinion should the independent valuation (invoked due to the lack of local water trades which is a direct result of the run of dry years i.e. there being no annual allocations of irrigation water over several years) of the water for sale be considered flawed by one of the parties involved.
- That the Irrigator-led Proposal process does not value the water for sale from an environmental perspective.

In conclusion the Wimmera Irrigators Association feels that local irrigators are being discriminated against by both the Murray Darling Basin Plan objectives and the Australian Government's water policy.

The Wimmera-Avoca Region is considered to be part of the Murray Darling Basin and thus is required to abide by the parameters set by the Murray Darling Basin Authority, the Federal and Victorian State Governments with respect to the management of water and environmental resources within the Basin.

However Wimmera irrigators face the following constraints

- Exclusion from participation in the current Australian Government's "Environmental Water Purchase Tender" process,
- Advice to date suggests that our region is unable to seek funding support, from the Australia Government, for modernisation of our irrigation system, where one of the key outcomes would be the return of water savings to the environment, and
- An Irrigator-led Proposal process which gives no weight the fact the local irrigation system will be closed forever with no possibility of reinstatement by irrigators either collectively or as individuals.

If further information is required then please contact me on 0427 504 018.

Sincerely,

Dale Frankel  
Chairman  
Wimmera Irrigators Association Inc.

Enc: Correspondence from the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, dated 25 November 2010, to the Wimmera Irrigators Association.