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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia
PO BOX 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

RE: MY SUBMISSION IN REGARD TO THE MDBA PLAN INQUIRY

I am concerned for the future rural Australian communities and Australian agriculture, as well as the environment. I have received information regarding the "Murray Darling Basin Guide to the proposed Basin Plan" (The Guide) which gives me no confidence in *The Guide* or the processes that have been undertaken in the preparation of that guide. I have read the terms of reference, and have tried to answer as best as I can, hopefully you can bear with me.

My husband and I are third generation owner/directors of an agricultural machinery dealership in Deniliquin, namely, Taskers Garage (operating for over 80 years in Deniliquin). We have struggled to survive through the last drought period, and now finally, with the drought breaking and a good season upon us, we are thrown in despair for our future with the threat of the "plan" hanging over our heads.

In Deniliquin, the estimated volume of water leaving the region will re-create a permanent drought forever. This is not just a bit less water.

Losses such as these will make many farms in our region unviable. Plans for 3 additional staff members (2 apprentice service technicians) and a Spare Parts Trainee are now shelved. The future of the business itself is now questionable, should this plan be implemented. With less water and few crops, the need for agricultural services will be severely diminished, and the likely outcome will be that our business will not be cost-effective.

Around 90% of businesses in the region are directly reliant on irrigated agriculture and there are no support packages for affected businesses. More people will have to leave town, possibly heading to the already burgeoning cities seeking employment. They take their families, their money and their skills with them which impacts adversely on the local economy. The drought has already provided evidence of this - decreased school enrolments, closing of businesses, falling house prices and downgrading of public services are just a few of the issues we have already had to deal with. The towns will not be able to deal with further cuts. None of us want to relocate, and leave our town. Our families are settled here – we love it. Besides, who is going to buy our houses?

Overnight with the release of this plan an "enormous blanket of financial uncertainty" was thrown over all businesses, assets and people of the region still struggling with the affects of drought. People who were just beginning to drag themselves out of the depression associated with the Millennium Drought were gutted by the "Plan". At a public meeting recently, one farmer said what many other people at the meeting were thinking... "It is hard to believe that your own Government would do this to you."

Both sides of politics have let Australian down badly over the last 50 or so years, in terms of planning and implementing significant water infrastructure improvements to "drought proof" the country and cater for our rapidly expanding population. Where are the new dams, piping systems, etc, etc. Mankind can put a man on the moon, set up productive irrigated farms in the desert in the Middle

East, so why can't we do something completely radical and ground-breaking in regard to management of our water? There are several previous plans that have been drawn in the past, but never implemented (Clarence River scheme, to name but one). This is an opportunity for someone in politics to do something spectacular for generations to come in terms of water management, not just "slash and burn" the agricultural industry and make promises to get them through the next election.

In an effort to mitigate the damage already inflicted on residents of the Murray Darling Basin and lift the blanket of uncertain financial security and investment which has been cast over the region, I ask that until all of the inquiries (MDBA, Senate and House of Reps) into *The Guide* are finalised and the findings made public:

1. The *Guide* be precluded from consideration immediately.
2. The Hon. Tony Burke – Minister for Water confirms the "Sustainable Diversion Limit Figures" referenced in that guide are to be reviewed and those put forward in "The Guide" are no longer up for consideration.

I believe that currently, the *Water Act* does not address the triple-bottom line, which is outlined by the National Water Initiative, the basis of the *Water Act*. It is heavily weighted in favour of the environment, and a true balance between the environmental, economic and social aspects needs to be attained.

To this end I ask:

that the *Water Act 2007* is reviewed and amendments made, with a view to making it more fair and equitable to all communities in the Murray Darling Basin, and compliant with the National Water Initiatives' triple-bottom line approach, treating the social, economic and environmental aspects of the Basin equally.

I ask that the inquiries currently being held and any future "Plans" that may be composed, be advised to take into consideration the following factors:

- The socio-economic factors that will affect rural communities brought about by any plan once adopted (as outlined above);
- Water that has already been taken or purchased from the MDB – for example the National Water Initiative, Water for Rivers, State Government purchases and the Living Murray initiative, amongst others;
- The Parliamentary and Senate inquiries should look at water management from a holistic perspective, not simply water for the environment;
- Initiatives beyond taking water from food production should be fully investigated; for example, upgrades of depression era water infrastructure, on-farm efficiency projects, storm water reclamation, water conservation options for all parts of the Basin urban and rural, towns and cities, the list options is long and the studies are exhaustive;

- The significance of domestic food security and the future needs for food;
- The wellbeing and continuation of one of Australia’s major export industries;
- The Governance of the environmental water that is “saved”;
- That any Government money that is allocated as recompense goes to infrastructure and socio-economic development, before going to water buy backs, to ensure that the best outcomes for rural communities can be met.

The inquiries should also take into consideration the following scenarios:

- Food security contingency plans, should the production of locally produced food be affected by more than 15 per cent;
- Contingency plan for an influx of people to the cities from rural areas brought about by substantial loss of employment opportunities in rural areas

I believe that these inquiries be led by an organisation, labelled an “independent commission” undertaking an “independent study”, should be truly independent, I therefore request that:

- All advertising undertaken by the Commonwealth Department of Water, on behalf of the MDBA, be stopped immediately;
- That all “best available” information used by the MDBA have a requirement to be peer reviewed; and
- I also demand that the “local knowledge” of rural communities, is actively sought and engaged across all matters of the Basin Plan, to deliver an outcome that considers all aspects of the issues, to deliver a truly independent report. The Committee members MUST come to the towns and regions that will be affected – you need to speak to the people who have been living and working in the region for generations – they know and understand the river and river systems far better than many of the “experts” that have been consulted to make recommendations into the future of the MDB.

I look forward to receiving the Committee’s response.

Yours sincerely,

Meredith Whykes-Tasker



TASKER'S NEW HOLLAND