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## **Tumut River Conservation and Rehabilitation Inc.**

The Tumut River is a highly valued environmental and social feature to the community. The development of the Tumut river valley and the many recreational, tourism and varied agricultural activities in the past have made the community of Tumut and the Tumut River well known around the country.

Since the implementation of the Snowy scheme in the late 60's and early 70's the Tumut River has been transformed into an irrigational channel. Unnatural cold, sterile high flows for irrigation during summer and dirty, ugly, smelly low flows during winter are destroying the natural beauty of this iconic river. This is the result of providing cheap water for irrigation and hydroelectric power and not taking into account the full environmental and social cost of this action.

The Tumut River is a major source of the Murrumbidgee river and an important part of the Murray-Darling basin.

The issues of the Tumut river basically fall into three general areas;

1. Ensuring that the river system is managed by an appropriate independent body in an environmentally sustainable manner following effective consultation with the community.
2. Setting realistic limits to the managed flows to maintain a healthy river system.
3. Ensuring that maintenance activities are scheduled and funded to repair the damage caused to the river.

We believe the management of the Tumut river should not be in the control of a State Government department that has a pecuniary interest in irrigation and electricity generation. The control and management would be better served by an independent body that can make management decisions based on science, community and environmental needs, not just irrigation and electricity generation requirements. For example The Catchment Management Authority(CMA).

The radically changed flow regime of the Tumut River has left us with many environmental and social issues;

- Dramatically accelerated erosion of river banks during summer irrigation flows. Erosion has been so widespread and damaging that the NSW government is rock facing many outside bends of the river. At best a band aid measure.
- A river that is almost dry throughout long periods of winter, including the isolation of anabranches and even some original sections of the river.
- A river that was once famous for its social events is now so cold in summer due to bottom of dam releases that swimming is only for the very brave.
- Widespread damage of the riverbed ecology due to fluctuations between accelerated high flows in summer and virtually dry river beds in winter.
- Loss of native fish species due to water temperature.

Despite numerous assurances in the past the river continues to be managed for the benefit of irrigators downstream and the Snowy Hydro scheme. Summer flows continue at extreme high levels

that generate large areas of erosion. Winter flows are so low that anabranches are left dry with poor water quality and the risk of health problems from residents being forced to use stagnant water.

An analysis of the river flows at Brungle bridge (based on the Department's own data) shows that the river has grown in capacity by approximately 30% since the Snowy scheme, an inevitable consequence of the river carrying almost double its natural flow capacity.

Funding to control the serious and ongoing environmental degradation of the Tumut river should be factored into the cost of irrigation and power generation and not left to the Tumut community to suffer the degradation of its natural and valuable feature and the costs associated with the damage..

It has been almost seven years since the last management plan lapsed and the new plan has still not been adopted for the Tumut river. The new plan recommends about \$1.9 million in works for the river annually but for the past several years only about \$570,000 has been spent. Murrumbidgee irrigators in the past shared the funding load but it has been several years since irrigators contributed. Maintenance is falling behind and problems escalating

We are enclosing an article called "River's stand out for all the wrong reasons" by Dr John Harris that explains the state of the Tumut River very clearly.

Yet for all these environmental and social concerns the Tumut River is still a place of great beauty. Tourism is still a major industry. The Tumut River is famous for trout fishing. It may be too cold for much swimming but it is still a fantastic river for canoeing. Tumut Shire has developed a series of beautiful river walks. The Tumut valley is a photographer's paradise in both spring and especially autumn with our Falling Leaf festival. The Tumut Valley is still well known for its agricultural production.

The Tumut river is much more than a canal to be exploited for irrigation and hydro power. Please consider our views and act now to protect an important iconic river system.

**George Holt, President**

**Edith Holt, Secretary**

**Kerry Naughton, Treasurer**

# River a standout for all the wrong reasons

A HEALTH check of the Murray Darling Basin has found that the Tumut River is the worst affected by dam diversion of all rivers in the system.

The report, the first comprehensive assessment of the Murray-Darling based on data gathered from 2004-2007, found that the Tumut River has suffered long-term environmental and ecological degradation.

The study looked at 23 river valleys of the Murray Darling Basin river system, assessing hydrology, fish and macroinvertebrates (animals without backbones) as indicators of river health.

The Murrumbidgee system is among the worst affected within the basin; and within the Murrumbidgee, the Tumut River is a "standout" in terms of environmental damage suffered, accord-

ing to one of the four authors of the study, scientist Dr John Harris.

"The fish found in the Tumut River were largely alien species – in fact 70% of the fish we found in the river were non-native species, such as carp, redfin and trout," Dr Harris said.

"We didn't find the range of macroinvertebrates – and here we're talking about insects and bugs and the like – which we expected to.

"They of course are crucial to the river's ecology.

"And in terms of hydrology, the Tumut River was the worst of all the rivers in the Murray Darling basin."

Dr Harris said the high summer flow, low winter flow regime coming out of the Blowering Dam, into the river, had severely changed the seasonal pattern of flow – more

than any other river in the Murray Darling Basin.

"In terms of seasonal flow changes, the Tumut River is a standout," Dr Harris said.

"It's carrying twice as much water as it once did during the summer, and then in winter, the flows drop to below what we would call normal levels."

The Murray Darling Basin Health check spanned four states and 96,000 kilometres of rivers and streams, ranking the 23 valleys' river health from best to worst.

The study found that rivers in the northern basin were generally better in health than in the southern part of the basin.

Over the 23 river ecosystems studied, only the Paroo Valley was in good health.

Two other river systems – the

Border River and Condamine Valleys – were judged to be in moderate health.

Seven other valleys were in poor health, and 13 ranked "very poor" – among them, the Murrumbidgee Valley.

Dr Harris, who has long-standing links with this region – his forefathers were among the pioneers at Yarrangobilly – said he remembers swimming at Brandy Mary's as a boy, and described the current state of the river as "terrible".

He said his last viewing of the river made a real impact on him.

"I was near the bridge on the river on the Snowy Mountains Highway at Blowering," Dr Harris said.

"It really rocked me to see the river's condition. The substrate of the river does not resemble what it should.

"The high flows have pushed down rocks on the river bed, and when you lift one up – and it's not easy getting one out – there's none of the life you would expect to see around there."

He said a radical change in thinking was needed at the government level to save river systems like the Tumut.

"I realise, for instance, that the irrigators downstream of Tumut and Snowy Hydro upstream have their demands," Dr Harris said.

"But the condition of natural resources needs to be paramount – at the moment, it is not, but sooner or later governments will change their thinking.

"Adjustments need to be made and they will have social implications. Our political leaders will have to show some vision.

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# River is among basin's worst

From front page

"The only way that will happen is if pressure is placed on them by the community, and I'd urge groups like the Tumut River Landowners Association to make their feelings known to the relevant political representatives."

The River Landowners Association has mounted various lobbying efforts over the years in an attempt to change management practices, but with no success.

Last week a new president, Justin Naughton, was elected, and he has vowed to launch another push for changes to the way the river is managed.

There has been no management plan for the river for over three years.

A feasibility study some years ago investigating alternatives to the high summer flow regime discarded options such as building a storage downstream, pushing water through Tantangara Dam and along the upper Murrumbidgee; and piping water from Blowering to the Murrumbidgee, as not economically practical.

Dr Harris noted there were immediate solutions to some problems on the Tumut River, but they also had so far not been considered due to economic reasons.

"A huge problem for the Tumut River, for instance, is the cold flows which come out of the dams and into the river," Dr Harris said.

"Icy cold water is taken from the bottom

of the dams, and ultimately pushed into the Tumut River, which has a terrible effect on aquatic species.

"Anyone who tries to swim in the Tumut River would know what I'm talking about, and the animals and plants along the river simply aren't meant to cope with those temperatures.

"But there are several different ways of overcoming that problem - there are engineering solutions available which can discharge the more temperate, surface waters of the dams down into the river.

"Underwater surface impellers and multi-level intakes would solve the issue relatively simply, if not all that cheaply."

An environmental flow regime for the river was also critical, Dr Harris said.

The scientist, however, noted that the river would not fix itself and said the political route was the only way to change the existing management practices.

"River management is a complicated mess at the moment and different levels of government are responsible for different areas of the river system," Dr Harris said.

"It doesn't make it easy to implement change.

"I'm a scientist and it's my job to point out what's wrong with the river systems - it's up to the community and politicians to come up with the resolve to change things."