



**Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Incorporated (MPII)**

**in conjunction with the**

**Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council  
(YACTAC)**

**Submission to the**

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia**

**Inquiry into the impacts of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in  
Regional Australia**

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## **Introduction:**

Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc (MPII) represents irrigators who pump directly along the full length of the Murrumbidgee River, and Yanco Creek System. Our members live from Batlow to Balranald and from Jerilderie to Moulamein. We also have a number of “operators” amongst our members although volumes of water are vastly smaller than the irrigation corporations. We are approximately one third of the diversions on the Murrumbidgee system being some 680,000 megalitres dispersed amongst approximately 500 members.

We wish to have noted that our organisation is in full support of the responses submitted by the NSWIC and the National Irrigators Council (NIC). Both of these organisations have provided a much more detailed in depth submission on the guide to the draft of the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the technical text provided by the Authority so far.

Due to the detrimental effect the guide to the draft of the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan will have if implemented, MPII submit their view on behalf of our communities at large. MPII stress that all Murray Darling Basin residents will be socially and economically decimated if this proposed plan were to take place.

## **General Comments:**

The Murray Darling Basin Authority’s development of the Murray Darling Basin Plan in its current form has the ability to set guidelines that will influence the level of food production in the Murray Darling Basin (MDB). It is disturbingly obvious that the objectives of the National Water Initiative agreed to by the Basin States in 2004 has not flowed through to the Commonwealth Water Act (CWA) and that the triple bottom line of optimizing social, economic and environmental outcomes will clearly not be achieved.

MPII members and their surrounding communities are astounded that whilst the MDBA has been chartered to adhere to the Water Act 2007, surely common sense should prevail if their proposed outcome will decimate regional communities in the Basin. On numerous occasions MPII has recommended that the Authority challenge the Minister for Water on the triple bottom line outcome which will not be achievable under the CWA in its current form.

MPII members and their communities are the custodians of the MDB environmental assets including public and privately owned systems. Many of our members have lived and worked alongside the MDB system for many years and witnessed the environmental behaviour and changes during extended dry periods. It is extremely disconcerting that local knowledge is not being accredited to the findings used to arrive at the figures in the MDBA’s guide to the proposed Plan. Whilst we respect that the Authority and their staff commissioned to develop the guide are environmentally well educated, it appears that practical research and knowledge have not been included.

MPII is of the view that surveys on wildlife and fish carried out by the Authority via commissioning scientists has been very limited in terms of the method

used to arrive at their findings. One example of how to achieve a more definitive and robust method of deriving accurate fish numbers would be to approach local angling clubs who have historical knowledge and constant experience in their local waterways.

In a relatively short timeframe, Mother Nature has satisfied the requirements for the MDB environmental systems. Many of us that reside along side key environmental asset are relishing in the restoration of the flora and fauna. On the contrary, we have witnessed the damage to many of these sites brought about by triggered artificial watering events. Therefore, we urge the Committee to recommend that the MDBA cross examine the environmental watering requirements and provide a robust environmental watering account encompassing engineering solutions for the environmental sites with state of the art works and measures to ensure every giga litre is in fact required. It is the view of MPII that the latter would provide a more balanced approach than simply creating a constant flow of water down the system allowing for over bank flows. MPII note that prior to man made regulation of the system the proposed environmental watering requirements did not occur. The systems natural environment was accustomed to extended dry periods followed by floods which are being experienced this year.

MPII suggest that our political leaders take into account the lessons from the outcome of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission where they determined it is local intelligence and management that is at the core of better control solutions and outcomes.

**Balancing Environmental Requirements:**

NIC and the NSWIC have covered the collective issues surrounding environmental watering, however MPII wish to elaborate on the Yanco Creek and its Tributaries. Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council (YACTAC) is a group which formed to balance the protection of the systems' riparian needs with the community. YACTAC has been receiving support and funding from government agencies to not only enhance the system but to protect its positive attributes.

The Yanco Creek and its tributaries feed off the Murrumbidgee River and the system creates a corridor for fish and wildlife between the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers. The system has and remains to be highly scrutinized in terms of its value to the environment and agricultural productivity. Whilst we are fully aware that compromises will be required if the MDBA is to develop a balanced outcome, how will they pick one system from another?

Using the Yanco Creek system as an example, any potential water savings made by the procurement of water entitlements requires a balanced approach to protect the environment whilst maintaining a certain level of agricultural production. These actions and decisions must not be taken lightly.

MPII is of the view that the CSIRO reports issued over the past eight years reflect poorly on what was once this countries premier scientific research organisation and that their sustainable yields report has been used for the Guides recommendations.

In conjunction with the CSIRO sustainable yields report, the Sustainable Rivers Audit (SRA) has also been accredited by the MDBA. MPII have challenged the MDBA with using the SRA findings that were researched during a record dry period with phrases such as “*best available science*” used.

### **Responses to Terms of Reference:**

- The direct and indirect impact of the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities, including agricultural industries, local business activity and community wellbeing

Many of the communities that are situated alongside or in close proximity to the Murrumbidgee River derive their core economic base from irrigated agriculture. The most predominant regional city which MPII represents is Griffith followed by large regional towns such as Leeton, Narrandera, Hay and Balranald. These regions have suffered financial hardship brought about by the drought conditions over the past 10 years. This decline is being exacerbated due to the release of the guide to the proposed Basin Plan. This economic break down is evident in the real estate sectors of housing and retail business’s where confidence in the Murrumbidgee Valley region is fragile.

Our regional communities have been accused of bullying the MDBA at the regional stakeholder engagement information meetings and behaving in an inappropriate manner. MPII is confident that your Committee will be aware that anger is a show of fear in the first instance and it was not only fearful irrigators but a large portion of community members that attended these meetings to convey their concern for the future of their livelihoods in the region.

- Options for water-savings measures or water return on a region-by region basis with consideration given to an analysis of actual versus licence entitlement over the preceding fifteen years.
- The role of governments, the agricultural industry and the research sector in developing and delivering infrastructure and technologies aimed at supporting water efficiency within the Murray-Darling Basin.

A major issue within the irrigation fraternity is that irrigation was once encouraged and applauded as a means of providing the nation with an abundance of food and fibre to feed and cloth not only our nation but the globe.

We are now seeing a complete back flip of this phenomenon where irrigators are perceived by the greens and many of our city counterparts as reapers and pillages of the land.

There is also a negative perception in the nation that money spent on upgrading water efficiency via infrastructure upgrades is a windfall for the irrigator. What a sad perception this is when the upgrade will have a two fold outcome of food and fibre production using less water which can be returned to the environment.

### *Environmental Works and Measures*

To add to the example provided by the NIC, it is astounding that the MDBA would not have made further consideration to the possibility of works and measures on environmental sites. Once again, MPII submit that there would be a win win for **all** if this strategy was progressed. Protection of the key environmental sites with minimal over bank flows would reduce the required volumes predicted by the MDBA and ease the level of the proposed SDL.

### *MDBA process of delivering the Guide*

MPII attempted on many occasions to advise the MDBA on an appropriate process to engage with stakeholders in the MDB prior to the release of the guide, however, even though the MDBA has a large bucket of funding for this purpose, they didn't or couldn't deliver on our recommendations.

The MDBA engagement team visited our regions approximately three times prior to the release. These visits occurred on short notice and in the first instance when irrigators' were at the peak of their busy time, hence lack of attendance. The meetings that did occur were brief and did not allow stakeholders adequate opportunity to ask questions or to convey their local knowledge to the MDBA.

### *Legal interpretation of the Act*

MPII have continually been informed by Mike Taylor, ex chairman, MDBA, that the legal interpretation of the Act has influenced their findings favouring the environment, whilst on the contrary our political leaders are vowing that a triple bottom line can be achieved within the constraints of the Act. This dilemma has added to the anxiety of our constituents and exacerbated their frustrations with the recent resignation of Mike Taylor. It is imperative that this issue is resolved as soon as possible so that all stakeholders involved in the Murray Darling Basin Plan can move forward collectively and achieve a triple bottom line outcome without any further conflicting interpretation of the Act.

- Measures to increase water efficiency and to reduce consumption and their relative cost effectiveness

MPII wish the Committee to note the works and investigations being done by Water for Rivers (WfR) in relation to water savings, measurement and procurement via efficiency projects. WfR executive and on ground staff have a wealth of experience in river operations and a clear understanding of the triple bottom line. Moreover, their local knowledge is second to none. Their projects are considered with utmost respect from the majority of stakeholders without a biased view in any which way or form. Surely government will see the need to follow suite with a moral obligation to promote water use efficiency as a first priority before resorting to direct buyback which will be the cause of detrimental decimation of our communities, family farms or food and fibre production if procured at the level suggested by the MDBA in the guide to the proposed MDBP.

- Opportunities for economic growth and diversification within regional communities; and
- Previous relevant reform and structural adjustment programs and the impact on communities and regions.

Unlike communities with a large population, the majority of our regional towns do not have the critical mass to survive if irrigated agriculture were to reduce to the levels suggested by the MDBA.

Whilst tourism is often viewed as being complementary to regional towns piggybacking on food and fibre production as a major attraction, if the production is reduced to a level that creates a tipping point, tourists needs will not be satisfied therefore their visits to our regions will cease.

### Key Points:

- **Commonwealth Water Act requires a Business Plan (Environmental Water Accounting Plan) prior to major decisions being implemented**
- **The States Water Sharing Plan's (WSP'S) require sufficient time to adjust to water buyback and more normal inflows prior to determining a SDL. *In recognition of the CSIRO sustainable yield report that states that the past dry ten year period is the worst case scenario.***
- **The Committee should acknowledge the environmental measures that were built into the WSP's which have not had time to be measured and monitored due to the last 10 years of drought. These environmental measures should be considered (post drought) before introducing a new round of SDL's under the Basin Plan**  
We have been through significant reforms and millions of dollars have been invested in the NWI, however under the guide to the proposed Basin Plan, the goal posts have been changed!
- **Key Environmental assets need to be determined and justified**
- **Regional social and economic impact studies need to be revisited using local knowledge**
- **The lack of recognition that the Basin provides food and fibre for a world that is predicting massive food shortages by 2050 needs to be addressed**
- **Triple bottom line outcome is required**
- **Broader engagement with stakeholder's and scientist's**

### Summary:

Water resources in the Murray Darling Basin have been controlled and managed by successive governments of all political persuasions for more than 100 years, yet the MDBA is informing us that the Basin is in a parlous state. This begs the question "what difference will the new management structure

make when there is an apparent lack of experience in water and environmental management?” Our reasoning behind this statement is that anecdotal experience from riparian landholders, and the evidence found by marine microbiologist Dr. Jennifer Marohassy, to name a few, is that the condition of the Basin Rivers is in a “robust” category considering the past ten years of dry climate conditions. Even though the MDB has experienced the driest period in 100 years, continued population growth, interception from farm dams and tree plantations, the system has still maintained water flowing from top to bottom with marginal irrigation allocations and reduced turbidity.

Salinity levels at Morgan are at low levels and anecdotal evidence is that fish stocks are rapidly improving with the European Carp not seen in the proportions that they were ten years ago.

MPII urge the Committee to recognise that the majority of consumptive users of water only have access to water via their allocation when the water is available. Yet, the Authority is of the view that the consumptive users should wear the reduction overall.

At the end of the day it may not be the individual irrigator (if he or she chooses not to sell entitlements) that won't survive, per se, in the MDB if the guide to the proposed Basin Plan is implemented, it will be the communities that will suffer at large. Having said that, irrigators' standard of living will continue to suffer post drought due to communities not having the ability to claw back the decline in services such as health, education and retail requirements to manage their operation. Included in this decline will be sporting and recreational facilities which are all essential elements for health and well being.

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