

Committee Secretary  
House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Regional Australia  
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14 December, 2010

Dear Secretary,

RE: MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN

Please find below my comments on the recently released Murray-Darling Basin Authority's "Guide to the proposed Basin Plan". I thank you for this opportunity.

Much of what I write has been reiterated many times before, but I write as one who is seriously personally affected by the proposal and concerned at the ramifications of the proposal for the greater good of people living along the river system and the nation as a whole.

There is no doubt that there is pressure being applied to the government by voters who see themselves as savers of the environment, (and they could be in the majority), however most of them have not crossed The Great Dividing Range. They have no idea of the existing situation apart from the opinion given them, mainly by scientists, whom themselves are unsure what water is required for the environment, (refer to Executive Summary page xix Amount of water needed for the environment).

1. My antecedents were closely connected to The Murray-Darling System during the 1800's up to the early 1930's. Included were river boat captains and crew members and others who eked out an existence along the river banks cutting and stacking timber as fuel for the river boats. It is obvious from family history and anecdotal stories, backed by broader history, that there were times when many parts of the system "dried up".

The only time the Red Gum forests and many of the wetlands obtained water was when there was moderate to severe flooding. This was before irrigation. Many of the paddle boats were often stranded at various locations throughout the system and waited months if not years to be refloated. It was not until the construction of engineering works in the form of weirs and dams that water was in some way assured throughout the system.

As I write the system is experiencing major flooding with many dams overflowing. Certainly this is of major environmental importance, but much of the flow is being wasted and could be stored for future environmental flows, if only past governments had had the foresight and intestinal fortitude to build more dams. Surely this is the way to allow for environmental flows in the future. There is an argument that much of the water in dams evaporates etc. and is wasted, and when a cost benefit analysis is applied dams are not the best solution, but surely in a dry continent like Australia any water that is saved is worthwhile.

2. There is no doubt that many 'mistakes' have been made in the past in the allocation of water rights. However these "mistakes" have all been made under the supervision of governments of all political persuasions, both state and federal. Now government is saying "we are going to fix this problem by the simple expedient of a water buy back". The buy back will mainly be from irrigators who are in a difficult financial situation and who will be pleased to sell. While some engineering solutions have been promised, we are yet to see action from government.

While buy back may assist some irrigators, it does nothing but destroy whole communities that depend on irrigation for their very existence and the livelihoods of the populations involved. Already in Griffith, the proposals suggested in 'The Report' have caused concern, with project investments drying up and house prices of the few being sold being lowered.

From a self interest point of view, my wife and I are concerned that our house, for which we have worked a life time to own will be seriously devalued by a government that is supposed to be looking after our interests as well as that of the environment. A home is the biggest investment most people will make and if government is going to destroy that investment then surely those affected should be compensated. This also applies to business. If properly compensated, I am sure we could all settle on the coast with the majority of the rest of the Australian population.

The suggestion in the report that there will only be 800 job losses (8.13 Implications for irrigated agriculture p.121), which is bad enough in itself, is ludicrous. I am not a Rhodes Scholar but would estimate the loss of jobs to be significantly higher than this, particularly if for various reasons such as the devaluation of houses and property, people could not afford to move to major centres seeking work. I am 70 years old and so there is no possibility of me being able to move anywhere unless the government wishes to purchase my property at its value before the report was made public.

3. On a broader view I would estimate that at least approximately 80% of Australians live along the coast and most of those in capital cities. That means 20% or less live in the rest of Australia, where the country is mostly arid or semi arid. The only real substantial inland population is along the Murray Darling System (Refer to 2.2 page 15 The Basin Community). Whether we like it or not and despite what some advocate, Australia's population will grow. These people will need to be located and fed. If we all live on the coast they will not be fed unless the food comes from overseas and we will continue to put pressure on the coastal urban environment and the quality of life of all who live there. Surely we should be trying to work out how we can accommodate more people along The Murray Darling Basin, not less.

4. In my opinion there are engineering solutions to the problems we face in The Murray Darling System. Surely scientists and engineers can work together

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to overcome the many difficulties we face, as they have in other countries, many of whom are less developed than we are. The answers will have to be many and varied.

There is one thing we can be assured of and that is that fresh water is going to become an increasingly scarce and valuable resource. Governments therefore have to ensure the storage of every possible drop, if they want to allow for environmental flows and food production. This is particularly pertinent if a 10% predicted decline in average annual water availability under median 2030 conditions actually occurs (3.7 page 33 approach to including climate change). Whether or not governments or others support the proposition, this will mean the construction of more dams and infrastructure. Whatever course governments take they must involve in a positive way with the communities that are going to be vitally affected. In this regard there has not been a good start in alarming a great number of those people vitally involved with changes proposed by government agencies.

5. Since the announcement of the plan the mood of the different communities along the River System has been grim with anecdotal evidence and personal inquiry indicating that business has slowed dramatically. Whatever the final outcome of the findings of the Committee, statements have to be made sooner rather than later, that will give those communities affected some assurances that the changes to be made will not impact dramatically on their livelihoods. If this is not done as soon as possible, these communities will unravel with all the adverse social consequences presently being predicted becoming a reality.

I wish you well in your deliberations and look forward to a positive outcome for all concerned.

Yours truly,

Noel Hicks