



Chairperson

Standing Committee on Regional Australia

By email to ATTN: the Secretary of the Committee

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Submission to the Inquiry into the socio-economic impact of the proposed Murray Darling Basin Authority's Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan (the Proposed Basin Plan) on regional communities

Introduction

I write as an individual living on a small farm at Finniss on the Finniss River in South Australia. From the top of our hill you can see Lake Alexandrina to the east and the sandhills of the Murray Mouth to the south-east. My husband and I farm 1,200 olive trees and 65 Angus X breeders and we both work full time off farm. I grew up on the Liverpool Plains and members of my extended family farm in Queensland, on the Namoi, and across the Liverpool Plains.

This submission is of an informal and general nature because my work commitments mean I do not have enough time to write more.

This submission is made in the context of **responsible** (I am not going to use the *sustainable* word) farming. My grandfather and then my father always told us 'look after the land and it will look after you' and I believe that we have a serious responsibility to set a benchmark to preserve the health of the Murray Darling Basin system for our children and grandchildren. And I am really worried that this might be the last chance we have to do so.

That benchmark must be the health of the Murray River at the mouth of the River, and then everything else will fall into place. Measure the River from the Mouth up and then everyone gets a fair go.

At the same time the current debate about the Guidelines to the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Authority Plan offers a great opportunity to have the debate about sort of country we want to live in, Australia's food security, the future of the family farm, the impact of Managed Investment Schemes (MIS), international ownership of land, and uncontrolled mining.

In the context of mining, I note that mining takes out and does not put back into the land and that Professor Tim Flannery has noted that some farming practices actually 'mine' the country and do not put back.

Response to the 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:

The health of the Murray-Darling Basin system has a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of Basin communities. The Murray-Darling Basin system – rivers, lakes, wetlands, tributaries, lagoons and underground water - is interconnected and there needs to be a 'bottom line' for the environment with the health of the river system measured by the flow of the River at the Mouth, before regional communities in the Basin can have any security.

This TOR implies fairness for all the MDB communities but to be fair the Inquiry must consider equally all communities along the system - the people at the Mouth of the River as well as upstream. Treating all communities as if they were the same, i.e. equality, will not deliver equity, i.e. fairness. For outcomes to be equitable, one needs to understand the context and connectivity of each of the communities and analyse within a framework that addresses whole of system health, for the environment, communities and economies.

This is not an easy task because of the diversity of Regional Australia but the wellbeing of regional Australians is vested not just in our bank balance but in our sense of identity and the way we see our world. The concerns of the Namoi CWA about the future of country towns are echoed by many in different ways.

The submissions made so far to the Inquiry are largely driven by sectional, local and individual interests. They may be characterised thematically:

- Respondents want no change to the status quo, and in this a number advocate delay for example to implement irrigation efficiencies before any buyback of water;
- Respondents want respect for local initiatives e.g. local Water Sharing Plans;
- There are misunderstandings about the river system and certainly about the nature of the function of the Murray Mouth and Coorong including the old furphies about evaporation, the estuarine nature of the Great Southern Lakes (Lakes Alexandrina and Albert), and the 'open the barrages' misconceptions;
- Food production security is a recurring theme - this relates also to another issue of foreign ownership of family farms.

We are all concerned about our way of life and we all tend to look at the short term but selling out the River will have a far reaching negative impact on the way we live and what it means to be an Australian and will damage our international standing.

The level of restructuring required is not a disaster. There are numerous opportunities for economic growth and diversification within most regional communities.

Australia has faced more significant structural shifts, in the demise of selection and soldier settlement schemes. The Plan indicates that more jobs might be created as lost. New businesses will be created. This point needs to be extrapolated.

This is an important decision-making time for long-term viability, and not all practices

from the past can reasonably be carried forward into the future (see the submission of Ruth Trigg).

This is an opportunity to have the great debate on the family farm, foreign ownership of land in Australia, and on viable and unviable farming. While it is human nature to wish to maintain the status quo, the Australian Government does not have to prop up risky or poor farming practices. People who farm on marginal country know it's marginal. What price MISs in this whole issue? Why should the Australian government prop up irrigated wheat farming on the Hay Plain, while countenancing coal seam gas mining on dryland farming country like the Liverpool Plains? Can someone farming in Bourke on the gamble of getting a crop of sunflowers on subsoil moisture every three years reasonably expect support at the expense of a dairy farmer at Menindie?

• Options for water-saving measures or water return on a region-by-region basis with consideration given to an analysis of actual usage versus licence entitlement over the preceding fifteen years

I applaud Chairperson Tony Windsor's comments to the ABC's Country Hour because he quotes 3,000 GL as the starting point: 'The starting point, rightly or wrongly, is 3,000 gegalitres.' We urge the inquiry to support the MDBA in modeling the full range of scenarios between 3,000 and 7,600 GL as the water required for a healthy River and hence healthy communities and economies.

With respect, I ask that the Inquiry not lose sight of the fact that water accounting must continually refer to the health of the River system as a whole and this base line must be established and be not negotiable.

In the first place surely we must comply with legislation – the *Water Act 2007* –and our international commitments including the Ramsar Convention.

On a lesser note, is it possible to measure actual usage? We are aware of one farmer who has created his own anabranch on the Namoi River from which to irrigate – how can that be measured? Is there an ambit estimate in the accounting to take the maverick water use into account?

• 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.

We submit that the role of government is to lead and develop a vision for the future.

The Murray-Darling Basin has been brought to destruction by years of over-allocation, mismanaged by governments. Only governments can fix this situation.

The agricultural industry is tremendously innovative but it will not self regulate. We should capitalise on water efficient technologies already in use in Australia's semi-arid zone and used by South Australian irrigators. At the same time the research sector should be funded appropriately to continue the work of developing water efficient technologies and efficient plant strains. Cutbacks to agricultural research are not in our best interests. Farmers cannot or will not always avail themselves of the science that used to be a free government service but is now only available on a fee for service basis.

To fulfil its role government needs to engage skilled and qualified people to fill the gaps. The gaps in expertise exhibited so far are:

- Consultation. Consultation has been modelled successfully by community groups but government consultation that I have experienced has ranged from spin to a defensive,

un-supported 'sales pitch'. People feel they are not being listened to and treated like mugs. No-one likes that. Helplessness and disappointment have given way to anger.

- Leadership and negotiation at the highest level. The new Chair of the MDBA needs to be someone of the calibre of a Chief Justice who can negotiate with governments.
- A social scientist – the MDBA needs an anthropologist and an agricultural economist as well as ecologists, hydrologists et al. Scientists need to develop the whole picture and not make improper use of selective science.
- Public education. Instead of misinformation people have a right to proper information about the situation facing the Murray Darling Basin system. Everyone needs to be made aware of the reasons we need to implement the Plan.

Finally we extend an invitation to the Standing Committee to visit the communities around the Great Southern Lakes (i.e. Alexandrina and Albert), visit the Mouth of the Murray and the Coorong, and meet the people of these communities.

Elizabeth Tregenza