



Standing Committee on Regional Australia
House of Representatives

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Submission on Impact of Murray Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia

The Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition (CVCC) is a Grafton-based community group which has members throughout the Clarence Valley in northern NSW. Since its formation in 1988, it has been actively involved in a wide range of environmental matters in the local community and beyond. One of the major interests of the CVCC over the years has been river health – in relation to the Clarence catchment and other river systems throughout the country.

1. The Murray Darling Basin Plan

The CVCC strongly supports state and federal governments' endeavours to improve the health of the degraded Murray-Darling system. Furthermore, we applaud the decision that the Plan to be developed will manage the Murray Darling system as a whole.

As 20 of the 23 basin catchments have been identified as being in poor to very poor condition, drastic action is urgently needed. The Murray Darling Basin Authority's (MDBA) Basin Plan Guide indicated that 7,600 GL was needed to restore the river system's health and yet it proposes returns of only between 3,000 and 4,000 GL. The CVCC wonders just how effective these smaller returns will be in improving river health throughout the system.

We understand that many communities will be impacted by changes to water allocations and will need a great deal of support from governments (who are responsible for the over-allocation of water) to make adjustments. Obviously these communities must be given appropriate and adequate assistance and should participate in planning and implementing the necessary adjustments. The fact that making adjustments is going to be difficult and expensive should not result in a failure to put an effective plan in place. The longer the system is left to deteriorate, the cost of remediation, if remediation is possible, will inevitably become even greater.

The CVCC questions the basis of the socio-economic analysis which the MDBA used in developing its 3,000 – 4,000 GL scenarios. Any socio-economic analysis must take into account the ecosystem services provided by the river. While we realize that putting a value on the environment is very difficult, if no value is placed on the services it provides, the results of any socio-economic analysis are severely skewed.

If river health continues to decline because insufficient water is returned to perform the necessary ecological and hydrological functions, the economy of the basin will inevitably decline. A healthy environment is necessary for a healthy economy.

2. Suggestions on More Dams and Supplementing Basin Flows from Elsewhere

A number of the submissions already made to this Inquiry canvass the possibility of solving the problems of the Murray Darling Basin by building more dams in the Basin or by diverting water to the Basin from other systems.

The building of more dams may appear attractive but such an undertaking would be expensive, would compound the present water quality problems, would likely result in further over-allocation and at best would only provide a short-term solution.

Inevitably one of the river systems suggested as a diversion possibility was the Clarence River which for years has been touted by supporters of Snowy Scheme type mega-engineering feats as the solution to inland water woes.

In June 2007 the CVCC made a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Inquiry into Water Supplies for SE Queensland (re Traveston Dam). This submission is available at:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/rrat_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/traveston_dam/submissions/sub223.pdf

What was stated in this submission about any diversion of flows from the Clarence River to SE Queensland also applies to any proposal to divert flows from the Clarence to any part of the Murray Darling Basin.

Any proposal to divert water from the Clarence – or indeed any other river system - is based on the assumption that there is “spare” water that is available for use wherever some decision-maker decides it might be needed. This is the kind of thinking that produced the degradation of the Snowy and the Murray-Darling Rivers. What has happened to these rivers shows the folly of interfering with natural systems. It is well past the time when we should have learnt this lesson.

The water belongs in the catchment where it flows naturally and where it performs a valuable ecological function.

The water for the Murray Darling Basin must be sourced within the Basin.

Leonie Blain
Hon Secretary