

**Submission to the House of Representatives Standing  
Committee on Regional Australia – Inquiry into the  
impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional  
Australia  
December 2010**

Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the peak body representing and uniting 16 of Queensland's rural industry organisations who work on behalf of primary producers across the state. QFF's mission is to secure a sustainable future for Queensland primary producers within a favourable social, economic and political environment by representing the common interests of its member organisations'. QFF's core business centres on resource security; water resources; environment and natural resources; industry development; economics; quarantine and trade.

Our goal is to secure a sustainable and profitable future for our members, as a core growth sector of the economy. Our members include:

- Australian Prawn Farmers' Association,
- CANEGROWERS,
- Cotton Australia,
- Growcom,
- Nursery and Garden Industry Queensland,
- Queensland Chicken Growers Association,
- Queensland Dairyfarmer's Organisation,
- Queensland Chicken Meat Council,
- Flower Association of Queensland Inc.,
- Pork Queensland Inc.,
- Biological Farmers of Australia
- Fitzroy Food and Fibre Association,
- Pioneer Valley Water Co-operative Limited,
- Central Downs Irrigators Limited, and
- Burdekin River Irrigators Association

## **Introduction**

This submission needs to be considered in the context of the QFF submission to the MDBA on the Guide to the Basin Plan. The key points raised in the submission are as follows:

1. The Commonwealth Government through the drafting of the Water Act 2007 and the Murray Darling Basin Authority through the preparation of the Guide have stepped away from:
  - a. Concept of a 'healthy working river' which is defined as 'a managed river in which there is a sustainable compromise, agreed to by the community, between the condition of the natural ecosystem and the level of human use.' *WaterShed February 2002 - Cooperative Research Centre for Freshwater Ecology.*
  - b. National Water Initiative (NWI) which has been agreed to by Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and seeks an outcome that 'optimises social, economic and environmental outcomes' by 'balancing sets of economic, environmental and other interests' and 'settling the tradeoffs between competing outcomes.'
2. The Murray Darling Basin Authority has conducted a flawed planning process to date:
  - a. Relying upon scientific and other technical input from in-house and contracted sources and limiting input from experienced water planning staff

- from the jurisdictions and belatedly attempting to address social and economic issues
- b. Failing to provide key information to explain how the key components of the Guide were assessed
  - c. Failing to implement an effective program to engage regional communities prior to and following the release of the Guide.
3. The Australian Government water recovery programs are important as a means of achieving the Australian Government's commitment to reduce water take to sustainable diversion targets. The programs are also essential in helping irrigation enterprises to adjust to the permanent loss of a significant portion of entitlements. However, processes for implementation of these programs must be improved to encourage 'willing sellers' and to facilitate investment in water use efficiency measures on farm.
  4. While inquiries and further investigations into economic and social impacts are welcomed it is not expected that these initiatives will define solutions. There is a need for re-engagement of communities based upon implementing the concept of healthy working rivers and effective measures to help communities adjust.

QFF submits that the Authority cannot begin preparing a draft Basin Plan until it has received informed submissions from all impacted irrigation communities across the Basin. QFF and the Queensland catchment irrigation communities do not consider that we have been adequately informed about the Guide to the Basin Plan. We acknowledge the regional information sessions that the Authority undertook presenting the Guide; however, these sessions did not provide sufficient detail about how the Guide would be implemented in Queensland.

The Authority must implement an effective engagement process with irrigation communities within each catchment as a matter of urgency. A draft program for regional engagement needs to be prepared and distributed for comment. This draft program must allow for consultation on the Guide including technical data analysis and opportunities to improve the implementation of water recovery programs. QFF is opposed to the Authority developing and releasing a draft plan before we have had the opportunity to provide a more informed submission on the Guide.

## **Response to Terms of Reference for the Inquiry**

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

QFF and communities in the Northern Basin had input to the preparation of the report by Judith Stubbs & Associates 'Exploring the Relationship Between Community Resilience & Irrigated Agriculture in the MDB: Social and Economic Impacts of Reduced Irrigation Water'. We concur with the findings of this study and particularly highlight the following issues in the light of the cuts to entitlements proposed in the Guide:

#### *Enterprise level*

- a. Permanent reductions in water availability as proposed in the Guide are significant and will reduce profitability. Some farmers will lose savings and invested capital through bankruptcy or sale of their farm and investments at a loss. These impacts will vary from enterprise to enterprise depending upon a range of factors.
- b. There will be direct flow-on effects to associated value-added processing, warehousing and distribution, and other related industries.
- c. Farmers must be able to buy replacement water or invest in substantive improvements in efficiency to neutralise the impact of the permanent reductions to entitlements. Factors that will affect this outcome include:
  - There is no guarantee that farmers will be adequately reimbursed for the value of lost water through water recovery programs or compensation under the risk provisions of the Water Act 2007. This is particularly the case with the many enterprises that depend on water harvesting and have significant on farm investments to store water. These farmers are questioning how the buy-back program will encourage willing sellers and allow them the opportunity to retire debt so that they can participate in on farm water use efficiency programs.
  - Investment in irrigation infrastructure could be lost if the farmer is unable to purchase replacement water in a market where water supply is more limited and dominated by the Australian Government's buy-back program. There are also significant limits to the trading of water across irrigation districts in the Queensland Murray-Darling catchments. Water resource plans place significant limits on the trading of water out of the limited number of irrigation schemes in these catchments. Also, trading of unsupplemented water, which comprises over 70% of entitlements, is allowed within defined river lengths. Trading outside these areas may only occur with approval on a case by case basis.

#### *Local area level*

- a. Stubbs outlines the difficulties involved in assessing with any confidence how resilient local communities are likely to be to permanent changes to irrigation water. For example, assessments must address the impacts on value-added processing, warehousing and distribution over variable hinterland areas and the implications of services thresholds where a loss of population means that communities may lose education, health and policing services. There may also be thresholds below which certain agricultural production activity is no longer viable. Many rural service industries such as cotton gins, agronomists, and chemical suppliers rely on a critical mass of production to achieve economies of scale in their business. A reduction in this critical mass poses a significant risk to the viability of these businesses. Smaller towns and hinterland areas may be seriously affected, particularly where these communities are smaller, more remote and more dependent on agriculture as the primary development opportunity.
- b. Stubbs also identifies a range of other factors that need to be considered in assessing the impacts of a permanent loss of water entitlements. These include:
  - The 'next best' land use without irrigation water.
  - Potential benefits from open trade in water.

- Opportunities to make further efficiency gains and have reductions in irrigation water absorbed within current operations.
- Other economic development opportunities available such as mining and extractive industries or access to major markets such as capital cities.
- Local leadership and capacity to deal with the permanent reduction in irrigation water.

Stubbs has provided a useful analysis for the selected case study areas Dalby/Wambo, Balonne and Moree Plains. Investigations conducted by Marsden Jacob support the Stubbs findings. Any amount of further analysis is unlikely to improve our understanding of the impacts that the proposed permanent cuts to entitlements are likely to have on farms and in local communities. There must be a focus on how the impact of any final cuts can be mitigated.

A priority must be the improvement in the implementation of the water recovery programs to encourage willing sellers and to facilitate investment in infrastructure to reduce water take to sustainable diversion targets. In particular, planning for the delivery of these programs in irrigation areas in conjunction with local communities should provide a better understanding of how effective these programs will be in neutralising the impact of the permanent reductions to entitlements. Without such an approach communities must assume a worst case reduction as a basis for their planning for the impact of the Basin Plan.

***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***

The most recent research that addresses this topic has been undertaken by the Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management. This research was in preparation for the implementation of the Queensland Government's Healthy Headwaters Program funded by the Australian Government as part of the water infrastructure water recovery programs. The first round of funding is expected to be announced in the near future. This up to date research has not yet been released but has been made available to the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.

QFF believes that this research would be valuable to the Inquiry particularly the investigation of measures to increase water efficiency and reduce consumption and the cost effectiveness of these measures. It is understood that this research draws substantively from previous experience with water use efficiency programs in Queensland.

It is also understood that SunWater in consultation with Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities has investigated opportunities to recover water from a range of potential investments in irrigation schemes in the Queensland Murray-Darling catchments. It would appear that this program is not proceeding but there has been no formal advice in this regard. QFF believes that it would be useful for the Inquiry to obtain advice on the future of this initiative.

***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.***

Implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan will be a significant intervention by the Australian Government to reduce rural water entitlements to achieve environmentally sustainable diversion limits. The cuts to entitlements proposed in the Guide are substantial. As a result, it is vital that the Australian Government implement measures such as the water recovery programs or pay compensation under the risk provisions of the Water Act 2007 to help rural entitlement holders and their communities to adjust.

It needs to be recognised, that in comparison with the southern basin, progress has been limited with either buy-back or water infrastructure programs in the Queensland catchments. Entitlement purchases secured as at 30<sup>th</sup> November in Queensland is 6,832ML, in comparison with a total of over 937,000ML across the Basin. Rural entitlement holders are concerned about the roll out of the program and particularly whether unsupplemented entitlement holders will have sufficient opportunity and encouragement to sell. In addition, the Healthy Headwaters on farm program has only just been initiated in the Queensland catchments.

Accordingly, it is important that governments direct their effort to water purchasing and water infrastructure programs, which provide opportunities to mitigate the negative impacts of a permanent loss of entitlements on farmers and communities. Governments have a key role to play in ensuring that agricultural industry and the research sector play a role in delivering these programs. To date this has not been the case. As outlined in the QFF submission on the Guide, entitlement holders and dependent local communities should increasingly be encouraged to drive these investigations involving the Commonwealth and State agencies responsible for the implementation of these water recovery programs. These community groupings need some scope to examine alternatives such as using water purchases to encourage on-farm infrastructure investment and coordinated assessments of the feasibility of a range of other investment options. There also needs to be policy clarification in regard to application of the buy back and infrastructure programs for groundwater and interception activity.

Attention must focus on 're-engaging' communities to help them address 'the opportunities for economic growth and diversification' to help cope with the Basin Plan. Our submission references an article produced by Leith Bouilly and Karlene Maywald (Basin Bookends, The Community Perspective - yet to be published) which recommends a three step process to 're-engaging communities in designing their future in an environment where less water is available for consumptive use'. These steps involve:

- a. Recommitting to the concept of achieving Healthy Working Rivers in the Basin by the Authority supporting and resourcing State Governments to engage communities in water resource planning to achieve outcomes outlined in the Guide to the Basin Plan.
- b. Australian and State Governments jointly funding regional communities to develop adjustment prospectuses to explore development opportunities and guide investment in the regions.

- c. Australian Government significantly increasing investment in irrigation research and development to facilitate transformational change to practices and production.

It will not be feasible to implement such a process unless the Authority can implement an effective engagement process with irrigation communities within each catchment as a matter of urgency. A draft program for regional engagement needs to be prepared and distributed for comment. This draft program must allow for consultation on the Guide including analysis of technical reports and opportunities to improve the implementation of water recovery programs. QFF is opposed to the Authority developing and releasing a draft plan before we have had the opportunity to provide a more informed submission on the Guide.