



Sustainable Population Australia

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Submission to Inquiry into Murray Darling Basin Plan

Inquiry Secretary
Standing Committee on Regional Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Leyne,

Sustainable Population Australia Inc (SPA) submits that

1. The establishment of the MDB Authority under the *Commonwealth Water Act 2007* was a step in the right direction in terms of raising community awareness of the environmental issues facing that region, and the cross-party support that enabled its passage is to be commended.

Unfortunately the Act requires the MDBA to "maximise net economic returns to the Australian community from the use and management of Basin water resources while protecting, restoring and providing for the ecological values and ecosystems services of the Basin". This might be an unreal objective.

Economic returns must be considered as a function of both affluence and population levels. If resources per capita are not to fall and if the environment is to be maintained in good health, then addressing what is an ecologically sustainable population dependent on the Basin, both inside Australia and overseas, is necessary. The Terms of Reference (TOR) should have included this.

2. Setting up of an Inquiry into the community impact of the proposals in the MDB Plan, e.g. for a water buyback scheme, is commendable also but, again, the weakness is that the TOR do not include addressing the ultimate carrying capacity of the Basin and the impacts of good Basin management on the sustainable population of Australia.

SPA therefore submits that an ecologically sustainable population be part of the TOR to be addressed, by legislating accordingly.

In support of the above, it should be noted that:

A. While Australia is currently estimated to feed 60 million people, very little of this is

food aid; the bulk is trade. Furthermore, Australia is a net importer of fruit, vegetables and, remarkably, oilseeds. We need to trade agricultural products just to buy the oil to run the agriculture itself, including the manufacture of fertilisers. Agriculture could not happen in its present form without oil. Therefore any agricultural production *traded* is a *cost of supplying Australia's 22.5 million people with agricultural produce* and not the economic benefit as so often proclaimed. So Australia's agriculture 'feeds' a total of 22.5 million, not 60 million.

B. Australia is short of fresh water for its 22.5 million people, as shown by

- (a) the increasing volume of fresh water that has to be generated through desalination plants in the major cities
- (b) the depletion of aquifers and ground water in many parts of the continent
- (c) the need to consider buying back 30% of water allocated to farmers in the MDB, to return it to rivers to flush out salt
- (d) ongoing and frequent water restrictions in cities and towns across the country.

C. Water shortages in the MDB are likely to get worse due to climate change, even if there was to be a stable population in Australia:-

- If *NO* water was extracted from the MDB by either the resident 2 million people or the non-resident 7 million Australian dependent on the products of its agriculture, the Murray would flow to the sea 99% of the time.

- Under *CURRENT* use, it flows to the sea 39% of the time (although we note that this has been achieved in the last eight years only as a result of constant dredging of sand from the mouth of the Murray).

- With *CLIMATE CHANGE* flow to the sea will be predicted to fall by 2030 to just 30%.

D. Water does need to be returned to the rivers of the MDB. The existence of water buyback schemes implies an excess population, not just of farmers whose water allocations need to be reduced but of the 40% of Australia's population dependent on those farmers in the MDB 'Food Bowl'. Farmers will lose their livelihoods and consumers will find food less affordable - a situation which would not arise if our population was held within ecologically sustainable limits. If the average allocation of water to farmers needs to be reduced by at least 30% then clearly our population has 'overshot' its limits by at least 30%.

E. The increasing scarcity of water available to Australia's human population as a result of population increase in Australia has resulted in water becoming more and more expensive. Examples include:

- (i) Water buyback schemes costing taxpayers billions of dollars,
- (ii) Water bills having risen due to the cost of desalination plants,
- (iii) The setting up the MDBA to work on the Basin Plan and its subsequent Inquiry, carrying out relevant research and investing in means of improved technology for greater efficiency is a substantial cost to taxpayers,
- (iv) Farmers who sell water allocations are not sufficiently compensated for doing so, since their farming 'adds value' to a primary product, i.e. water. Compensation is necessary and just, but requires money.

(v) Deforestation and loss of native vegetation due to over-use of land in the MDB catchment results in devastating flood events, which waste buildings and infrastructure, again at a massive cost to the community. Revegetating land with native species is required, which is a costly matter.

(vi) To prevent devastation when flooding occurs, revegetation is needed over extensive areas of the MDB. Landowners who put their land under native forest and other native species to meet the need for controlled release of groundwater from rainfall need both payment and compensation.

Since *all* money is raised from the productivity of the Earth, this requires an additional impost on the Earth's ecosystems to pay all of the above.

SPA submits that:

Australia should seek to stabilise its population through a raft of policies and processes, including the introduction of zero net immigration, removal of the Baby Bonus and schemes to reward those who contribute to a falling population, not a rising one. A rising population can only put further pressure on water, the environment and the taxpayer.

Even these measures would leave Australia well short of an ecologically sustainable population, i.e. one in which the environment of the MDB can recover to some degree of good health.

Along with advances in agriculture, largely supported by cheap but finite oil supplies, it is the hard work of good people like doctors and others in the health profession that has increased our survival rate and given us the problem of global and local over-population. If the hard work of good people has got us into this environmental 'mess', then the hard work of good people, provided they are working from a base of scientific fact, can bring us out.

Yours sincerely,

Sandra Kanck
SPA President