



Allan Jones

23 February 2011

To the Standing Committee on Regional Australia

My name is Allan Jones and I am a farmer and an environmentalist. I have farmed rice near Deniliquin for over 30 years. I have always been interested in the environment and actively sought ways to be involved in local environmental programs.

In the late 1980s I worked for NSW Soil Conservation Service on a program to preserve river bank health by planting Common Reed(*Phragmites australis*) to prevent erosion. Through this I became aware of the Land and Water Management Plans (LWMP) and encouraged the Denimein Landholders Association to put together a LWMP committee to develop a LWMP for Denimein. I became the inaugural chairman of this committee.

The Murray Darling Basin Plan is based on a false premise.

The premise is that the environmental problems of the basin are due solely to water extraction and that by returning water to the system the Basin's environment will be saved.

This is a simplistic proposition and shows no grasp of the complexity of the causes of environmental degradation across the basin. By pursuing this approach a great deal of hardship will be created with very little chance of achieving the environmental outcomes we all desire.

Such simplistic approaches to developing environmental solutions has been tried and subsequently rejected before. One of the goals of the Denimein LWMP was to address rising water tables and the subsequent salinisation of the district. We started out with the simple view that water table rise was a consequence of surface waterlogging and that the installation of surface drainage was the solution.

Further investigation found that this approach was too simplistic and a more integrated approach looking at the total environment was needed. We undertook a program of total natural resource management to develop an integrated approach which achieved a water balance (i.e. no net accessions to the watertable) once fully implemented.

The Denimein LWMP was acknowledged as a frontrunner in environmental management and was awarded silver and gold Rivercare awards.

At the Committee's public hearings in Deniliquin, Tony Windsor rightly recognised that the major environmental problem in the 1990s was the salinity issue. Many LWMP groups were working on addressing this issue, as mentioned above. The drought also saw this issue temporarily alleviated.

The Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) has failed to consider any other aspect contributing to river health, such as riverbank, weed and exotic fish management or water quality. In many cases more water is not the solution, and in some cases it could simply be a matter of managing the water that is available more efficiently.

Land and Water Management Plans

The Land and Water Management Plans (LWMP) were a good program that required community involvement to identify local issues, develop and implement solutions and produce measurable environmental results.

These were community driven plans that successfully addressed a range of local issues including salinity, water quality, native vegetation and on farm management practices, all designed to improve the overall environment including river health.

After 13 years of a 15 year program, the funding dried up. To date we have had no explanation as to why this program was shut down.

The co-funding arrangements of the LWMP allowed the community to have a sense of ownership of the program and made sure that proposals were both economic and effective.

Any Murray Darling Basin Plan should be modelled on this sort of successful community engagement that would see the people who live and work in the catchment design realistic solutions to river health. This could be achieved by using organisations already in place such as Catchment Management Authorities working with Regional Development Australia instead of needing to completely reinvent the wheel.

Example of simple thinking:

The most extreme example of environmental degradation of the Edward River occurred with the invasion of European Carp. The water became muddy, in stream vegetation diminished and the fishing completely changed.

In the past five years of drought, through a time of record low inflows, the environmental health of the Edward River has improved greatly. More native fish have been caught than ever, the in stream vegetation has made a recovery and the water has become clearer.

The simple solution would be to increase extractions to maintain the low water flows to enhance the environment.

However, we know the answer is not this simple and demands an understanding of the total ecology of the river and the breeding and feeding habits of native and introduced fish to satisfactorily explain the improvement in environmental health of the river.

The myth of over-allocation

If diversions don't exceed inputs, then the river is not over allocated. The fact that allocations are adjusted according to water availability reinforces the fact that the river is not over allocated. In fact, during the drought, when my allocations were at zero percent there was still water in the river – and water crossing the border. This again shows that the river is not over allocated.

It has been documented throughout history that the Murray River used to run dry in periods of extreme drought. The fact that during this most recent drought, the hottest and driest on record apparently, no town along the length of the Murray went without water and the Murray continued to flow its entire length shows that river management works.

To claim that 60 to 80 percent of pre-development end of valley flows is needed to ensure environmental health is ludicrous when you consider that these “end of valley flows” would have been zero in times of drought without development.

Example of river health issues not related to flow:

A scientific report a few years ago found that the main cause of blue green algal blooms was riverbank erosion. I don't know if this was a natural process or if it was the result of poor management of the riverbank.

I suspect the latter. If this is the case then the solution should be to restore proper riverbank management, not waste precious water trying to cover up the underlying problem.

If it is from a natural process the point then becomes should we interfere with a natural process or should we manage the system for human desired outcomes.

Conclusion

I hope the Committee sees the Guide for what it is – a simplistic, ill-thought out solution to what is a very complex problem.

I believe that through water buy backs and other environmental programs, like The Living Murray and the local Wetland Watering Program, there is already enough water for the environment. What we need to see now is efficient management and delivery of this water.

I also believe that there are many other issues relating to river health that has not been considered by the MDBA, such as the invasion of exotic fish species and the erosion of riverbanks.

I am a farmer and do not have the scientific background or the resources of the MDBA, but even I can see that more needs to be done to consider the whole environment, including the human environment, than what the MDBA has produced.

Yours faithfully

Allan D Jones.