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## MURRAY DARLING BASIN PLAN

### SUBMISSION BY CITY OF GREATER BENDIGO

The City of Greater Bendigo recognises the over-allocation of water in the Murray Darling Basin and supports a balanced approach to changes within the Basin.

- 1) The approach needs to be balanced.
  - a) Consideration of the Basin's environment must include consideration of the Basin's communities.
  - b) The economic and employment impacts under the Guide must be more rigorously assessed and considered at local, regional and basin-wide levels.
  - c) The Plan should provide an environment that creates investor confidence in our communities, businesses and communities.
  - d) The Authority should advocate to the Commonwealth Government that buy-back be restrained until a strategic framework is established.
  - e) The impact on food security for domestic and international consumption has not been adequately considered in the Plan.
  - f) the plan needs to be supported by good science.

The Greater Bendigo farming community is relatively small, but significant. Concerns about the Murray Darling Basin Plan have been expressed to Council primarily through its Farming Advisory Committee. The Municipal Association of Victoria has held sessions for Local Government in Bendigo. Council has also sought its own independent advice and has held discussions with Coliban Water, but otherwise, there has been little engagement with our community except via the media.

The City of Greater Bendigo supports an approach that will gain greater community involvement.

- 2) The need for community buy-in and support for the plan.
  - a) The front-line environmental managers found within the Basin communities should be engaged to bring their skills and knowledge base to the benefit of the development of the Plan and its future implementation.
  - b) Water savings and environmental flow contributions made to date should be acknowledged, and the baseline for both diversion limits and environmental flows must be clearly documented and communicated.
  - c) There is a critical need to re-establish the Community's faith in the process before the Plan is developed in detail.

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The City of Greater Bendigo is often involved with major strategic planning processes for land use, including commercial, residential, industrial and township planning. Considerable time, consultation and engagement is required. The Murray Darling Basin Plan is significant for the nation and more time is required for the engagement and consultation.

3) Time must be available to establish a workable solution.

The intent of Parliament to consider the Plan is clear, but so is the recognition that more time is needed to get the right solution.

Perhaps the most fundamental shortcoming of the Plan has been the failure to demonstrate to the Basin communities that there is a need for change. The Murray Darling Basin Plan and the objectives of the Water Act 2007 will not be achieved without the support of the community. It is therefore critical that the Authority and the Commonwealth Government reassess and reconstruct their engagement and development processes for the Plan to ensure that the community can understand and accept the need for change.

There must be engagement with the local community address local concerns which are outlined below:

There is a concern that a disproportionate amount of water will be purchased from smaller catchments, such as Loddon Campaspe catchments compared with larger ones. For example, the Campaspe catchment will have up to 50% of its former allocation purchased back, compared with only 22% of the Murray catchment. This will result in smaller catchment areas being unfairly disadvantaged, areas which produce high value crops and provided much employment and contribute to many local town economies. Furthermore, in estimating the amount of water available to environmental flows, we are led to believe that water that is intercepted prior to it reaching the stream/river (e.g. that intercepted by plantations, farm dams in upper catchments), is considered in contributing to the environmental flows as it is considered too difficult to retrieve. This will therefore place a further burden on the smaller lower catchments and result in equity of burden across catchments.

If the proposed amounts of water are to be taken from the regulated diverters of Campaspe and Loddon catchments, then a significant amount of the money that farmers/irrigators have spent on developing assets and infrastructure will be made redundant. Many irrigators have previously spent large amounts of money to install water saving practices at their own expense and if the proposed plans take place, they will be left with stranded assets, e.g. pumps, power connections, pipe mains and lasered lands will be made redundant.

*Provision for the future*

The proposed plans will also result in the demise of irrigation in smaller valleys of the northern Victorian rivers, result in future economic loss. Without the necessary allocations of water, irrigators/farmers will be unable to grow certain crops/pastures for example, lucerne hay. This will result in not only a loss of personal income for the farmer, but will also have wide-reaching ramifications and flow-on effects within the community and for consumers. For example, if there is less lucerne hay available, dairy farmers will not be able to feed and milk as many cattle, which may result in less milk being available and therefore the cost of milk may increase for the end consumer, contributing to higher costs of living across the country. A decrease in the number of irrigators will also result in less employment opportunities, ranging from the farm hands employed by the farmer to mill workers and wholesalers.

If the proposed reductions take place, many farms may become unviable which will not only lead to loss of farmers to the industry, but will also lead to ongoing mental health effects, not only for the farmers, but also for their families. This displacement of families will further erode the social fabric of many country townships who have already been suffering from hardship during the previous drought years. Social fabric has been found to be a key determinant of health.

The following way forward is recommended for our community:

- A. Engage the Greater Bendigo community
- B. Build the Case for Change
- C. Demonstrate Environmental Efficiencies and Benefits
- D. Establish Economic and Social Impacts, including compensation for redundant infrastructure
- E. Establish a Balanced Framework
- F. Plan and Implement the Change

If the productive base of the region is diminished, then the standard of living for our region's communities will also diminish. Some communities do not have the resilience or opportunity to recover from this impact.

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