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Comments on Guide to Proposed Basin Plan

First let me state that I recognise that there has been ***an over allocation of water in the Murray Darling Basin by various governments in the past.*** Some of this water has to be returned to the rivers if there are to be healthy. ***There is no long term future for the environment and irrigators without healthy rivers***

The return of between 3000 and 4000 GL to the Murray and its tributaries is a sound plan, but just to return the flow is not enough.

There has to be ***sound and practical plans to return water to the floodplain and wetlands, and to dry out regularly those wetlands that are permanently inundated*** e.g. from Lock 11 downstream.

Salinity is another great problem in the basin, but because of the lack of rainfall, and therefore irrigation, and the supply of water mainly from upstream storages, it has not in recent years been a noticeable problem. However it is still there and will reemerge in years with higher allocations. When irrigation returns to those irrigated districts that should never have been irrigated, saline groundwater flows will return to the rivers.

I do not believe that the ***irrigation districts that cause the problems in the Basin have been targeted properly.*** Two that come readily to mind are the Kerang Irrigation District in Victoria, and the Wakool Irrigation District in NSW. A report by the MDBC identified these areas as being most suited to evaporation basins, and the by implication the least suited to irrigation due to their poor soils and saline groundwater. Both contribute large groundwater flows to the river during normal rainfall and irrigation. Kerang has 72% of the groundwater problems of the Goulburn Valley. The 220,000 ha Wakool District is predicted to have 42,200 ha of water table within 2 metres of the surface by the year 2025. Not good. The Wakool irrigators offered to sell all their water to the Federal Government, but it was refused. A great pity, because it would have been a much better value than the water purchased by the Commonwealth from Tandou or the Twynam Company.

There are other areas that have salinity problems. I am not suggesting that water should be arbitrarily removed, but I believe that those ***areas which cause the most problems should be targeted with offers to buy back***

The floodplain is a great problem, and I am very concerned about what is happening above Menindee in the Darling and its tributaries. In 2007 the MBDC released a report by Webb McKeown & Associates. The title was "The State Of the Darling". It was very interesting

Private storages above Menindee

- Hillside dams--1347 GL
- Ring tanks 2990 GL

Evaporation figures

- Menindee 393 GL annually
- Hillside dams -Upper Darling basin 727 GL annually
- Ring tank-Upper Darling basin 630 GL annually

It seems quite strange that millions of dollars have been spent, and is still being spent to minimise the evaporation from the Menindee Lakes, but very little has been or is currently being done to seriously measure the extractions and losses above Menindee. There is no real measurement of floodplain harvesting and hillside dams. Also recent reports prepared for the MBDC have shown that in many cases where water is metered and I quote ***"have shown that actual extractions of water are substantially greater than those being recorded by meters"*** (SMEC 2006)

There is no question in my mind that all extractions from the rivers have to be metered or measured. There must be a ***proper audit undertaken of water use, and a plan to upgrade the measurement in the basin and to establish a suitable compliance program***. Compliance will be the only way to deal with floodplain harvesting and hillside dams. It should be relatively straightforward with the use of satellite imagery and some fieldwork. Dealing with extensive non-compliance is an important step before reducing entitlements.

Failure to measure the extraction of water will lead to poor economic, social, and environmental outcomes. It also can be very unfair. Obviously there is an ***urgent need to for all water extracted to be measured***, and I include stock and domestic, because under the present Act, there is no control of the amount of water extracted.

Finally, ***the raising and lowering of weir pools have to be a priority***. I realise that this will, in many cases, mean restructuring and strengthening of weirs. ***This will be expensive but NOT as costly as pumping water onto the floodplain, and it will be more effective.***

Vin Byrnes