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15 June 2012

The Committee Secretariat,
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia,
Parliament House,
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Attention Committee Secretariat

Re:- Inquiry into certain matters relating to the proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan

The Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Councils (RAMROC) represents the interests of eighteen Member Councils in south west New South Wales, which covers an area of 126,595 sq km and has a 2011 ABS Statistics population of 168,643.

RAMROC Councils welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this current Inquiry, because it is widely accepted that the Revised Draft Murray Darling Basin Plan currently with Water Minister Tony Burke MP is an entirely unsatisfactory and unacceptable Plan, which will substantially cut food production and processing industries in the Southern Murray Darling Basin, which in turn will have serious impacts on rural towns and communities in the RAMROC region and other food producing regions as well..

In representations which RAMROC Councils have made to Federal Government Ministers and to the Murray Darling Basin Authority, and in particular to the submission lodged by RAMROC in response to the Draft Basin Plan, we have consistently drawn attention to the following important points:-

- The SDL calculations in the current Proposed Basin Plan are not supported by any comprehensive and detailed Environmental Watering Plan, which was originally claimed by MDBA to be the fundamental first step basis for the determination of watering needs for the environmental assets and the calculation of new Sustainable Diversion Limits. The science remains unclear and is deemed to be unconvincing at best, in the same way as are the undefined and unquantified environmental outcomes;
- The Environmental Watering Plan as set out in the Proposed Plan provides only a framework and a guiding set of principles, thus requiring the respective State Governments to complete detailed EWPs at a later time. There appears to be no rational justification for this strategic shortfall, as comprehensive EWPs could easily have been developed and incorporated into the Proposed Plan by MDBA adopting a closer collaborative and co-operative working relationship with the States;
- There is a total lack of Federal Government vision and strategy for Australia's water management future, with no endeavour whatsoever to investigate alternative water solutions. There is no long term National Water Plan and certainly no attempt has been made by the Government to bring together the interrelated issues of water, food and fibre production, food security, sustainable regional and rural communities and a healthy river system and environmental protection. This is despite the fact that these key issues all fall under one combined Ministerial portfolio. A real opportunity of co-ordination and a Whole of Government approach has therefore been totally ignored;

- The issues of evaporation losses of some 900 GL per year in the South Australian Lower Lakes region have not been addressed in the Proposed Basin Plan. This defeats the whole concept of taking a “basin wide” approach and reinforces the understandable total lack of public trust and confidence in the process;
- There is no analysis of environmental water delivery constraints and mechanisms, or of ways to address likely third party impacts. No details have been given as to the nature and extent of third party impacts on private properties, public lands, agricultural production and river based tourism (the Murray River at Tocumwal being a prime example), which will no doubt arise from prolonged periods of poorly timed environmental water releases and consequent sustained flood level conditions;
- There is no comprehensive plan which assesses the amount of water savings that can be achieved through the implementation of specific infrastructure projects at either State or local levels, or to achieve water savings from infrastructure programs which can more effectively deliver environmental flows to some of the identified assets;

Specifically in relation to dot points 3 and 4, it is extremely disappointing that the Draft Basin Plan has not been able or allowed to fully address the major national issues of harnessing and effectively using our nation’s water resources, or to address the huge evaporation losses of the Lower Lakes and Coorong.

From any national interest point of view, these are matters that simply can no longer be ignored by the Commonwealth and State Governments. It is totally unacceptable for Governments to use the now customary excuses that major projects are “too expensive or don’t meet the required cost benefit requirements”, or that they are “environmentally unacceptable”. This is an unfortunate attitude that will see Australia continue to fall far behind the rest of the world

We in practice know that there are real project proposals currently before both Federal and State Governments, which can effectively and efficiently divert surplus water resources from the northern states and from coastal regions in New South Wales.

We also know that various proposals have been put forward, which would go a long way to resolving resolve the issues of the Lower Lakes and Coorong. Some of these are set out in private and organisation submissions to the Draft Basin Plan, but have been ignored.

These projects have the potential and the capacity to adequately meet the environmental and healthy river requirements of the MDB system, as well as maintaining sufficient water resources for food production and associated processing and transport industries.

This Murray Darling Basin issue is arguably the most important matter affecting Australia at the present time. It requires innovation and vision, additional research and development and nation building projects. Australia is fast becoming a net importer of food, our food exports are diminishing and imports are rising at a horrendous rate.

Unfortunately, there appears to be a total unwillingness to do anything but pander to the interests of extreme groups. Our Parliamentarians need to look past the next election and put in place long terms actions and strategies which will assure the future of our nation.

It is to be hoped that this current inquiry by the Standing Committee will become a catalyst for expanding the Governments’ horizons past the current level of thinking and encourage them to demonstrate a long term vision that will ensure the future for all Australians, not just minority tunnel vision / single issue groups.

For your Committee's information, I am attaching a copy of the RAMROC submission lodged on 16th April 2012 with MDBA regarding the Draft Basin Plan, together with Appendix A, which is a list of questions which were put to MDBA in Hay on 4th April 2012, and which as yet have not been adequately addressed to any degree of satisfaction to the Member Councils.

The RAMROC Chairman Cr Terry Hogan AM and the RAMROC Executive would be very pleased to address the Standing Committee in relation to these issues.

Yours faithfully,

Ray Stubbs

RAMROC Executive Officer