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Submission by Central Downs Irrigators Ltd to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia – Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia

Central Downs Irrigators Ltd represents irrigators that use water from regulated and unregulated sources along the Condamine River between Warwick and Dalby. The principal water sources include the Upper Condamine water supply scheme run by SunWater, water harvesting from river flows, groundwater and interception of overland flow. The current Condamine water resource plan and resource operations plan regulates access to all surface water sources including overland flow interception. A water resource plan is currently being prepared for Condamine groundwater.

The most significant impact of the Basin planning process and associated water recovery programs to date has been the significant level of uncertainty that the process has introduced for all key stakeholders (irrigators, other businesses and local governments). CDIL does not expect this level of uncertainty to improve with the release of the Basin Plan. Our key concerns are as follows:

1. The Guide has failed to explain and justify environmental water needs at a catchment level let alone for an upper subcatchment such as the Condamine. CDIL questions whether the draft Plan is likely to address this concern particularly in the Condamine subcatchment.
2. The Guide has raised questions about treatment of interception activities. The current Condamine Balonne water resource plan is an effective and cost efficient means of managing overland flow take for irrigation purposes but this is put at risk over questions about control of interception for stock and domestic use. Is this issue likely to be addressed and if not will overland flow take for irrigation have to take the required cuts? Will Commonwealth programs allow for voluntary water recovery of overland flow take?
3. Unless the Basin Plan clearly defines environmental water requirements at a catchment and subcatchment level, progress with the implementation of water recovery programs is likely to continue under a conservative 'no regrets' approach. There has been no water recovery in the Condamine subcatchment to date. It is not expected that there will be willing sellers at the Department's current per megalitre valuations which do not reflect returns that growers achieve in this subcatchment.
4. The Guide does not explain and justify groundwater requirements in areas like the Condamine. There is also no explanation as to whether reductions in groundwater entitlements will be on a voluntary basis through implementation of Commonwealth water recovery programs. It is difficult to see how the current Condamine groundwater plan can be progressed by the Qld Government until these matters are clarified.

The Murray-Darling planning process will have a significant impact on irrigation activity and particularly investment the longer it takes for the above issues to be addressed. This situation will also be exacerbated by the ongoing concerns over the impacts of coal seam gas developments.

Graham Clapham
Chairman