



Deep WATER BLUE

AFTER A WAVE OF ANGER SWEEPED THROUGH THE MURRAY-DARLING FOLLOWING THE RELEASE OF THE GUIDE TO THE PROPOSED BASIN PLAN, RIVER COMMUNITIES HAVE BEEN DISCUSSING THEIR FUTURE WITH FEDERAL MPs.

STORY AND PHOTOS:
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There was a certain cruel irony when one of the first parliamentary hearings on the future of the Murray-Darling had to be postponed because of flooding.

For a decade drought had impacted on the lives and livelihoods of so many along Australia's major river system. But on the day that had been set aside to hear from Swan Hill residents about how the Basin plan might affect them, nature again intervened with an unprecedented deluge.

That in itself is indicative of the challenges facing the Murray-Darling Basin and why the development of a sustainable water use plan has proved such a conundrum.

Following the winding river, members of the House of Representatives

Regional Australia Committee have over the past three months spent many hours discussing with the people who live along its banks the impact of the *Guide to the proposed Basin plan* released in October 2010 by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

And what they have heard from farmers who rely on the river water to produce their grapes and citrus fruit is that, despite the testing times they have faced, they still love what they do and want their families to continue farming the fertile floodplains for many decades to come.

But there is no escaping the fact there has been a heavy price to pay for working the land that relies on water when water has been in short supply.

Higher than average suicide rates amongst farmers has been one of the

dreadful consequences of the ongoing tough conditions, according to Professor Chris Miller from the School of Social and Policy Studies at Flinders University. And those conditions have impacted on entire communities.

"They are reflected in mental health referrals, domestic violence levels and increasing crippling household debt," Professor Miller said while at a committee hearing in Murray Bridge.

"They are also reflected in Basin communities, with declines or stress in agricultural related industries, in the retail and service sector and in the housing market.

"There is also recent evidence of growing anti-social behaviour amongst young people who are still left behind in those communities. They are also reflected in the continuing failure to



WATER FIGHT: Debate continues over the future of the Murray-Darling.

attract and retain essential professionals, such as medical and healthcare staff, teachers and public servants.

“Without that group of key workers, the future of Basin communities in the long term will only be very limited and restricted.”

During the committee’s visit to Mildura, rural counsellor Graeme Loison told MPs how vulnerable many hundreds of irrigators are as they contend with high debt levels and low water allocations.

“We had a client come through the door about 13 or 14 months ago who was at his wits end, had been stranded buying water at inflated prices, at a time where he couldn’t sell his produce,” Mr Loison said.

“Now the effect on that family was that his wife was found self mutilating by their teenage children. Now they came in absolutely distraught, the fellow was in tears. They’ve ultimately exited from farming, much to the benefit of their family.”

Third-generation Mildura irrigator Vince DeMaria of Sunraysia Citrus Growers warned the committee any cutbacks to water supplies would be devastating for the 30,000 plus community.

“As we are already at the peak of our efficiencies in irrigation, cuts of 30 per cent would lead to 30 per cent reduction in our production, a 30 per

cent cut to employment which would lead to further job losses in our city of Mildura from our suppliers who provide cartons, chemicals, bottles for wine, transport industries and the like,” Mr DeMaria said.

“Water is critical for us, if we don’t have water during the critical months of our flower set, we don’t have a crop. If we don’t have a crop, we can’t service our debt and we can’t keep viable farms – so water is crucial. Without water, Mildura wouldn’t exist.”

“This community is stressed enough as it is without the proposed Basin plan.”

Mildura grape grower Ashley Johnstone said the *Guide to the proposed Basin plan* has created “huge angst” in the community.

“This community is stressed enough as it is without the proposed Basin plan. We’ve gone through low water allocations and poor prices paid for crops. Many farmers are going out of business. You only have to take a drive around Sunraysia and the pump districts to see how much dried off land there is.”

During the recent drought another Sunraysia grape grower Richard Mills spent \$50,000 one year on buying water

just to keep his vines and fruit trees alive for his family’s future.

“Country people like myself are resilient and we know in agriculture that you have your ups and you have your downs but what we don’t need is really bad policy like what this plan is going to be if they take away water permanently from farmers like myself. Taking 37 per cent of my water away from me will be just devastating for my family,” Mr Mills said.

But along the river the committee also found many supporters of the proposed plan.

Aboriginal elder Tom Trevor from near the Murray mouth in South Australia hoped upstream irrigators remembered the pitiful state of the lower lakes and the Coorong region during the recent drought.

“There was no life there, and when you went down to the Coorong, it was like you were searching for the spirit of the Coorong, and we couldn’t feel it. It was like going to something that was slowly dying,” he said.

His people have lived on the Murray for thousands of years. He called on all users to respect the river more by ensuring it receives significant environmental flows.

“What’s required to save our river, our lakes and our Coorong is water flows. The water must flow down. Now I know that’s hard for people to come



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to terms with, when water is seen as a major source for the economy in this country, but as I said we’ve got to find the balance.”

SA Water’s River Murray operations manager Brenton Erdmann said increasing environmental flows back to the river will be vital to keeping the Murray mouth open to the sea.

“From a River Murray perspective, it’s a barometer of what’s happening on the whole of the river system. It’s right at the end of the system so all the ills of the system upstream ultimately end up down here,” he said.

“And that’s culminated in the fact we’ve been dredging the Murray mouth for the last eight years. Because there has been the combination of drought and water extracted, there’s been no decent flow going out the Murray mouth effectively since about 2001.

“Pre-regulation the flow out of the mouth on average was 14,000 gigalitres a year. Now the long term average flow out the mouth is something like 2,500 gigalitres a year. So you can’t pull that volume of water out of the river without having some significant effect on the ecology.”

At Langhorne Creek near the lower lakes the committee met with local wine grape grower Tom Keelan, who believes more water is needed from irrigators upstream to help flush out the lower Murray and improve water quality in Lake Alexandrina during the inevitable dry times ahead.

“I used the analogy of a toilet – you can’t go to the toilet for three-and-a-half years and not flush it, and that’s the same for our river system – we have to be able to flush the system out,” he said. “We need to be able to export the salts that we are all putting in through fertiliser, through irrigation and just through naturally leaching them from our soils into the system.”

Committee chair Tony Windsor (New England, NSW) believes much of the anxiety and anger in the Basin communities about the proposed plan has come about



RIVER RESCUE: *Water flows can help restore the health of the Murray-Darling.*

because of the poor way in which the Murray-Darling Basin Authority communicated its proposals for water cutbacks.

“I think the way the authority delivered the message was quite appalling because the assumption that is out there now from people with individual water entitlements is that they are going to have a percentage of their water taken away – that someone is going to come in and take their water,” Mr Windsor said.

“No government is suggesting that. The Commonwealth is engaged in a voluntary water buyback, which is fair and reasonable.”

Mr Windsor said it will be the federal parliament along with the state and territory governments in the Basin and not the Basin Authority that will decide how much of the draft plan will be acted upon.

“The authority in a sense has no real authority in terms of being able to implement anything. It’s a vehicle or a child of the Commonwealth government and the four states signing an agreement.”



THREATENED LIVELIHOODS: (Top) River communities have expressed their concerns at public hearings; (right) Grape grower Ashley Johnstone says there is “great angst” in the community.

“I think we need to take advantage of this parliament and try to solve the problem.”

A contentious issue during committee hearings was just how many thousands of gigalitres of water are needed to be returned every year to the Murray-Darling to improve its environmental flow. The authority recommended that between 3,000 and 4,000 gigalitres will be needed to move the Basin from poor to moderate health. The challenge will be deciding just how much water should come from irrigator buybacks, by improving water infrastructure and making other efficiencies.

Farmers Vince DeMaria and Ashley Johnstone are both sceptical of the science driving the push for more water being returned to the Murray-Darling, especially in the wake of the recent floods in Victoria and Queensland.

“We expect that the Basin plan should be slowed down so that science can be fully peer reviewed and absolute in its integrity. We don’t want science that’s dodgy to threaten our livelihoods,” Mr DeMaria said.

“We’ve come out of one of the worst droughts that this country has ever seen, and now we are in flood. Obviously there is still drought and flood cycles, it’s not all doom and gloom as we’ve been led to believe. I think Mother Nature has shown us that it can rain,” Mr Johnstone said.

But the Australian Conservation Foundation and Environment Victoria both want all governments to accept the *Guide to the proposed Basin plan*. The ACF’s healthy



rivers campaigner Arlene Harris-Buchan said the water reform process for the Murray-Darling has been going for 20 years and needs action.

“Back in 1994 the Council of Australian Governments said, ‘We’re taking far too much water out from the Murray-Darling Basin and we have to return more back to the rivers’. The proposed Basin plan is the culmination of 20 years of work in this area. And it is very, very important that we address the over-extraction of water, that we put some balance back into the system, and find a better way of sharing water between irrigators and the environment.”

Environment Victoria’s Juliet Le Feuvre agreed saying the Basin plan is the “best opportunity we’ve got to restore the rivers of the Basin to health so we’re strong supporters of the concept of the Basin plan”.

“We’re delighted that it has actually come to having a plan which addresses the environmental impacts across the whole Basin,” she said. “The whole idea of having a plan which addresses environmental impacts, is based on sound science and takes environmental needs into account is just fantastic.”

Despite the fears of many involved in irrigation, Tony Windsor is hopeful some compromise can be found.

“Are there further water use efficiencies on farms? What about evaporative savings? What about infrastructure improvements? How much does all this add up to? Then on the other side of the equation – what can we do in terms of managing the environment better to achieve the environmental outcome but not use as much water as the authority is suggesting.

“You can end up with a win, win situation, where the environment is better, river health is better, people in the lower lakes are better off, and people in Mildura and other towns won’t be decimated – so there is a way through this. Rather than run away from this and face another 10 years of uncertainty, I think we need to take advantage of this parliament and try to solve the problem.” •

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the parliamentary inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in regional Australia visit www.aph.gov.au/ra or email ra.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4162.