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The Committee Secretariat,
Inquiry into Water Use Efficiency in Australian Agriculture
PO Box 6021,
Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2601

Submission to the “Inquiry into Water Use Efficiency in Australian Agriculture”

I write provide a submission to the Inquiry into Water Use Efficiency in Australian Agriculture. I would like to appear before the inquiry. My concerns are as follows.

The Murray Darling Basin Plan aims to deliver a healthy and resilient system for people and the environment throughout the basin.

The Coorong is listed as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. That listing recognises the importance of this wetland for migratory shorebirds which use this region during our summer before returning to countries in the northern hemisphere where they breed during the austral winter. The countries with which we share these birds include Russia, Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan. These are important trading partners with Australia and destinations for our agricultural products and natural resources. Furthermore, we have international migratory bird agreements with some of these countries (CAMBA, JAMBA, ROKAMBA) indicating the importance of our shared responsibilities to protect the habitats of those birds. The migratory bird agreements and the Ramsar convention place obligations on Australia to (i) manage and protect the qualities and characteristics of wetlands of international importance, like the Coorong; and, (ii) manage and maintain the habitats used by migratory shorebirds. These international obligations are embedded in Australia’s EPBC Act. Failing to meet these obligations could be used to jeopardise lucrative trade agreements for Australia, including those of agriculture.

The Coorong is the last wetland system of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) and is critically important as habitat for migratory shorebirds, yet the Coorong does not even have an allocation of water within the Basin Plan. No other wetland within the basin supports the numbers and diversity of migratory shorebirds that the Coorong supports. Despite the intentions of the MDB Plan, the Coorong has not recovered and continues to deteriorate as a habitat for these birds. For example, the numbers of migratory shorebirds using the Coorong in January 2017 were the lowest on record. In recent years, the small migratory shorebirds (various sandpipers) were spending more than 80% of the day foraging in the Coorong. When birds spend large amounts of time to collect food (as they are forced to do in the Coorong) then the habitat is poor quality. This is supported by finding the emaciated carcasses of various sandpipers in the Coorong in recent years. Key aquatic vegetation, such as *Ruppia tuberosa*, continues to struggle to recover and build resilience. For this plant, ecological resilience is measured as the numbers of seeds that remain on the mudflats after this annual plant has flowered and set seed. Current seed abundance remains at a meagre 1% of the

levels recorded at the time the Coorong was nominated as a Wetland of International Importance. Seeds of *Ruppia tuberosa* are part of the food chains of the migratory shorebirds.

Australia, by continuing to ignore our international agreements with trading partners to protect and manage wetlands and migratory shorebirds, puts at risk the breadth of international markets for our produce. Investments in water reform that fail to deliver our environmental obligations ultimately jeopardise Australia's international reputation and capacity to trade freely. The Coorong is the barometer that informs the world about Australia's commitment to deliver a truly healthy and resilient Murray Darling Basin and honour international agreements.

Given that the Coorong is in dire straits, the Australian Government should guarantee that the current plan to return 3150 GL of water to the environment is delivered on time and in a transparent manner that allows the volumes to be easily audited. If this volume is inadequate to allow the recovery of the Coorong, then the Australian government will need to invest substantially to recover the ecological character of the Coorong, or risk even further international embarrassment that could affect trade, and ultimately undermine any efficiencies in water use.

Yours sincerely,

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