

The Witham Family

15 December 2010

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

The Secretary

We are a second generation farming in the Riverina, New South Wales.

Please consider our submission to your enquiry in which we have addressed the terms of reference. In our submission we have discussed the management of the Murray-Darling Basin, and the development and implementation of the Basin Plan, with particular reference to:

(a) The implications for agriculture and food production and the environment;

- Agriculture will become less viable, worthwhile and attractive as an industry
- Food production will diminish and the demand for imported raw material and manufactured food stuffs will become overwhelming. Logistically, for the agriculture industry as well as its employees and for the health of our nation this will be detrimental.
- History shows that the environment has suffered peaks and troughs in water flow for centuries. Some of Australia's early explorers documented the need to carry their boats as the rivers were impassably low. Environmental flows forced by human intervention could indeed be seen to have a negative impact interfering with what Mother Nature intended. Dry cycles will eventually end and wet cycles will take over as has been seen in our region lately. Areas of our country are devastated by fire whilst simultaneously others are by flood.

(b) The social and economic impacts of changes proposed in the Basin;

- Not only will this devastate the agricultural industry and its employees but the flow on effect to the regional communities engaged in and relied on by the agricultural community.
- essential services will be marginalised as the population diminishes they will be amalgamated and restructured to major centres (including health, law enforcement and education). This will further reduce populations and a town's ability to attract residents. The reduction in health services in particular will mean less accessibility and affordability which in turn means less health prevention strategies will be employed and therefore health intervention measures which are a significant burden on the system will increase dramatically. There is already an identified gap between the health of metropolitan and rural Australia. In the particular area of mental health this would be magnified with the rise in depression and suicide guaranteed to rise and unless we import mental health workers as well not much will change.

- Due to years of drought many land owners have made the biggest gamble of their life/career and extended the overdraft or sought additional loans to try and make a go of it. Banks are willing to lend depending on the amount of equity and assets accrued. In many situations the land values are insignificant but it is the water licences attached to the land that make it valuable. Reduction in water allocation is something we have all had to deal with and annually the Minister for Water and the Environment inevitably makes water cuts and sets the figure for the upcoming season. Farmers are generally conscientious users of nature's resources and make careful consideration on the water use and gross margins. For seasonal crops the weather and water availability are managed to balance these factors. In the case where a farmer decides to make permanent plantings a much longer term investment is made and relies heavily on the availability of water to make the investment in infrastructure and planting worthwhile.

- Not only does this mean the end to many generations of farming families but the active discouragement of Fathers to their offspring about entering into the perils of the family business. For those who inherit farming land this is possibly the only way of getting into the business but this often comes at a cost and if coupled with debt could be seen as a form of child abuse.

-Water has become a very valuable and tradable commodity. In addition to calculating crop or livestock gross margins farmers are considering the option of just selling their water on either a temporary or permanent basis.

(c) The impact on sustainable productivity and on the viability of the Basin;

- In our area alone there has been a definite decline in the number of small family owned and operated properties whereby one family owned one farm and it supported at least two generations. The major trend has been that large corporations have bought up property or families are having to buy out neighbouring properties to have enough land to support the family. In doing so there is significantly more financial burden, workload and risk. Not only are the farming operations getting bigger but more equipment is also necessary due to the lack of seasonal and skilled labour. Young people particularly the males are moving away and into much more financially rewarding occupations such as natural resources extraction. As people move away they are unlikely to return and a diminished population means the basin will be a locality no longer a community.

(d) The opportunities for a national reconfiguration of rural and regional Australia and its agricultural resources against the background of the Basin Plan and the science of the future;

-Although the Murray Darling Basin Authority plan will directly impact on the Murray Darling Basin Area the constrictions that the demise of this great food bowl will have on the rest of the country and our export capabilities will be enormous.

(e) The extent to which options for more efficient water use can be found and the implications of more efficient water use, mining and gas extraction on the aquifer and its contribution to run off and water flow;

-Prior to and especially since the release of the MDBA plan there have been many options suggested to enhance water use efficiency. Many of these ideas seem very feasible and look at long term investment and multiple uses. Despite there being an abundance of ideas the Government is reluctant to put its researchers to good use in identifying feasibility practically and economically.

(f) The opportunities for producing more food by using less water with smarter farming and plant technology;

-As a nation we must strive to find more efficient means of managing our natural resources no matter where we live or what resources we utilise. As a community farmers have been striving for water use efficiency and frequently contribute to trials and research and

development undertaken by Government agencies. During the drought R&D funds had been rapidly disappearing and many farmers protested loudly about the diminishing levels of funding and staffing at local Department of Industry and Investment locations.

-The above mentioned reduction limits R&D which is vital in addressing this point. Great advances in crop breeding have meant much more robust varieties for particular environmental conditions, the reduction in water use pre and during the sowing and growth phases of a crop. Soil moisture probes and water table information is becoming increasingly available with farmers able to receive information via text message to increase yield and avoid crop stress.

-Farmers are increasingly aware of their soil types, the need for crop rotation, stubble retention to enhance the profile of their soil, watering devices and the most suitable method for their venture.

-It is not only in times of scarcity that we should concern preservation but even when it would seem there is an abundance we must continue to strive for efficiency.

(g) The national implications of foreign ownership, including:

(i) corporate and sovereign takeover of agriculture land and water, and

(ii) water speculators;

- The food production capability versus a growing population has been a forefront on the agenda for many countries, including Australia. If policy and planning don't restrict foreign takeover then not only will we need to import some food but most of it.

-Without water we cannot grow food and our production will not meet the demand of our population. With limited farming land and resources we will not afford the luxury to pick and choose our export origin (if indeed anyone can spare us something) and will therefore be putting our diminishing local production at risk and our population. A recent example came with the importation of fruit treated with a particular chemical which is banned in Australia due to the significant number of and severity of symptoms related to its use for human consumption.

-As aforementioned water has become a very tradable commodity and just as there are significant guidelines and boundaries in place for water trading and transfer between local zonings for ground and surface water there must be strict ruling and scrutiny for investors also.

(h) Means to achieve sustainable diversion limits in a way that recognises production efficiency;

- Sustainable is obviously hard to define. The complexity of this term has been emphasised by the recent resignation of the MDBA Chairman Mike Taylor and the avoidance of providing any real logic by Water Minister Tony Burke.

(i) options for all water savings including use of alternative basins; and

- A capital injection of funding into R&D programs to give educated and careful consideration to the construction of water storage and diversion projects including damming, pipelines and desalination. The construction of further water storages is essential not only for the health of the river but also for those communities that would not be there had infrastructure such as the Snowy Hydro Scheme not been commissioned.

Yours sincerely

Mike and Pauline, Ben and Kim, Elizabeth and Ben, Caroline and Bernadette.