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Response to questions on notice – Public Hearing – Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Bill 2023.

The Murray River Group of Councils (MRGC) appeared before the public hearing being conducted by the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee into the current Bill before the Australian parliament, the Water Amendment (restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023 and the Chair requested a response to questions on notice.

We have reviewed the joint submission from Professors Wheeler, Grafton, Quiggin and Connor (submission 13), as well as the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) submission (submission 30) and respectfully acknowledge their research and experience in this field.

The specific questions on notice and the MRGC response are provided below,

1. Professors Wheeler, Grafton, Quiggin, and Connor's submission shows population trends since 1996 and whether you are aware of this data that suggests there are broader factors influencing population shrinkage, not just water buybacks?

The MRGC is aware and has read this submission and acknowledges that several factors have contributed towards population shrinkage, including climate change, more jobs in bigger centres, and housing availability.

We don't assert that water buybacks are solely responsible for the shrinking populations in the smaller towns. Still, it will compound all these factors and accelerate population shrinkage in these towns. As community leaders and members of these communities, this is our lived experience, and as we speak and engage with people in these towns, this is what we hear and see.

In this report, the authors note that population decline accelerated when the Basin and environmental recovery peaked. (pg 8). Further buybacks will be the straw that breaks the camel's back, and we will see further declines in these small towns and communities if buybacks go ahead. It means that farmers leave their farms, people lose their jobs, and people move elsewhere.

Decreases in populations of 5 or 10% don't look large when presented in an academic paper, but to these small towns, the loss of people means fewer people in our sporting clubs and local schools and sees the further decline of small towns.

2. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) submission states that assessing the impact of water recovery is difficult to determine with precision, given the complexities of the water market and other factors such as climate change and long-term structural changes in regional Australia (see page 5 of submission 30): What is your response to the department's evidence? Do you stand by your statement that all the job losses in your region are the result of buybacks?

The GRMC acknowledges and agrees with the DAFF submission, which indicates that the Murray Darling Basin Plan is complex and discusses the different forms of water recovery. This paper identifies that buybacks are the most straightforward and cost-effective, but all methods could achieve the environmental targets.

The GMRC advocates that the environmental targets are met by off-farm recovery and the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism. These methods will limit the social and economic impact on our communities and population decline.

The GMRC, in its submission, did not make a statement that all job losses in our region are the result of buybacks. We have always believed that buybacks accelerate and increase job losses in our communities and areas.

Should you wish to discuss the contents of this letter or if you require further information, don't hesitate to contact our Executive Officer, Stephen Gardner, on _____ or _____

Yours sincerely

CR Rob Amos
Chair