



Water Amendment (Purchase Limit Repeal) Bill 2019 Submission Response

Balonne Shire Council *does not* support the *Water Amendment (Purchase Limit Repeal) Bill 2019 (the Bill)* proposing to amend the *Water Act 2007 (the Act)* to repeal the statutory limit of 1500 gegalitres on Commonwealth purchased surface water across the Murray-Darling Basin.

Our communities have suffered significant socio-economic impacts due to the recovery of water for the environment through buy backs under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (the Plan).

If further water needs to be recovered to meet environmental outcomes, the Federal Government must consider a holistic approach and resume water through efficiency projects to avoid the crippling impacts felt not only by our Shire, but other Basin communities alike.

The Balonne Shire covers 31,119km² and is located in the Lower Balonne section of the Northern Basin in the Murray-Darling Basin, with a Shire population of 4480 people. Every town in the Balonne Shire is situated beside a river, providing access to fishing, water sports and the natural riparian environment. The Shire relies heavily on agriculture with a contribution of almost 50% of the Shire Output of \$597.1 million in 2017/2018.

Two of the Balonne Shire Council townships, Dirranbandi and St George, have been identified in the *top four (4) most affected communities* by the water buy-backs under the Plan. The hard-hitting impacts are outlined in two reports commissioned by the Murray Darling Basin Authority in November 2016¹.

The buy-backs have had far-reaching impacts across the entire Shire. Council is battling to recover from the impact of the water recovery methods of the Plan and we appeal to the Government to cap buy-backs. Coupled with the impact of the Plan on the shire, is the high reliance on agriculture, a high population with low SES backgrounds and the prolonged and ongoing drought. The proportion of the Balonne population in the most disadvantaged quintile is almost twice the Queensland average². Balonne Shire has been drought declared for the past seven (7) years with recurring drought periods over the past 15 years³.

Summary of Key Impacts due to Water Buy Backs

- 27% reduction in irrigation area.
- Cotton production in the Dirranbandi area alone was reduced by 40,000 bales (market worth of \$20 million).
- Estimated loss of 197 FTE skilled workers (including vital community leaders and volunteers).
- Reduction in school numbers by up to 50%.
- 146 properties listed for sale in Dirranbandi and St George due to the unstable economic climate.
- Widespread effects on all towns in the Shire and implications for essential services including social services, health and education.

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We make our appeal to the Government to retain the current cap limit on water buy backs to ensure the ongoing survival of our communities.

Cr Richard M
Mayor

¹ https://www.mdba.gov.au/sites/default/files/pubs/630%20-%20NBR%20Community%20profile%20-%20St%20George_0_0.pdf

¹ https://www.mdba.gov.au/sites/default/files/pubs/630%20-%20NBR%20Community%20profile%20-%20Dirranbandi_0_0.pdf

² Murray Darling Basin Authority, date, *Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan Technical Background Part III: Appendix C Lower Balonne Community Profile*

³ <https://longpaddock.qld.gov.au/drought/drought-declarations/>