



Chris Stillard on behalf of  
the Stillard Family

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia  
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To whom it may concern.

I would like to brief your committee of our history to show the Standing committee that our family has extensive knowledge in irrigation, and have shown through our own endeavours to be progressive farmers and our opinions on the subject of the draft Murray Darling Plan would be of benefit to this committee.

Our family first settled as farmers in Barooga, NSW in 1904. Constable John Lord Stillard who was the first residential policeman in Cobram purchased land which he named 'Marboc'. His children and in particular Fred Stillard farmed and prospered on this farm and provided extensive contract work for farmers, and in the construction of the first channel works using horses to develop the current irrigation infrastructure we use to this day .

Fred's eldest son Richmond (Dick) took on the farming operation later and as the state water supply channels were completed, around 1940, he purchased surveying equipment and taught himself to lay out contour irrigation (flood) as the land lay on 'Marboc' and other purchased landholdings. In his own words irrigation "proved a great insurance against drought" in his wool, fat lamb, hay and grain operations.

Dick had 4 sons, all of whom took to farming to varying success. Two sons Roy and Maxwell (Max) became interested in more intensive irrigation. In 1958, once

they became familiar with their father's contour irrigation, they, in 1969, grew an excellent bean crop using a rolling sprinkler operation but found the manual rolling of the system too work intensive. They were approached by a representative of HJ Heinz after watching their efforts in growing the beans to try to grow processing tomatoes for the Heinz factory in Dandenong Victoria. They flood irrigated raised beds for this crop and later on started to laser form their paddocks for better water control and ease of managing the irrigation systems. They were very successful with growing processing tomatoes and were known as some of the best growers in the area. In the early 1980's they inspected tomatoes grown under drip irrigation in central NSW and decided immediately to implement this new technology. Although it was very expensive to purchase, the benefits in water management and yield increase outweighed the negatives. Quickly their investment in this technology had bigger yield benefits and, as well, the early field computers made field management a lot easier with automatic start up and shut down, field valve changes and fertigation application. Water usage was also reduced by 25% with greater tonnes per hectare achieved and better quality fruit.

In 1990 Max also invested in electronic moisture monitoring equipment which allowed a more precise management of soil moisture.

Roy, in 1985, purchased land just out of Barooga which was predominately sand and sandy loam soils. He put down a spear point system to procure bore water to put through his drip system and to this day is still growing quality processing tomatoes. At the time growing tomatoes on sand as well as bore water was unheard of, and, through trial and error Roy had mastered this practice and is using water with 2,500 parts salt. His son Bradley is currently undertaking a Nuffield scholarship investigating around the world his topic of using saline water for agriculture.

Max's son, Christopher (Chris), took over the tomato operation but after a few years changed direction to lease the original family farm 'Marboc' from his cousin Bruce Stillard, on which he grew lucerne hay under laser graded flood irrigation for stockfeed. In 2005 he investigated the benefits of growing lucerne over subsurface drip irrigation and using his existing equipment and knowledge of drip irrigation to install the system and manage it. He quickly found that he was using less water per hectare and nearly doubled the yield from this practice with an outstandingly better quality product to sell. Recently he has upgraded his pumping system which is now being fuelled by natural gas. Bruce, in 2001, concentrated on a project to establish a small persimmon orchard to supply the domestic market to trial intensifying more into the land and gaining more income from less area. He has

installed a micro irrigation system to irrigate this orchard and this has been a reasonable success. Chris now assists Bruce with the day to day management of the orchard.

#### Comments on the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

We believe that the majority of irrigators do understand it is necessary for the government to have water holding for environmental flows. To have a 4000gl seems excessive. We see many problems with this proposed sum of water as if in theory you were able to purchase this water, many country towns will be crippled or die due to the shrinkage of jobs and services to these areas as the greater loss of production due to the loss of irrigation water. There is no doubt there is currently a pool of willing sellers due to the recent drought but we are sure that after that pool of sellers are bought up supply and demand will kick in and the Government will have to pay vastly more to achieve its quota. This program may turn out extremely costly for the taxpayers of Australia. It also seems strange that while countries around the world are spending huge sums of money on food security in their own lands and abroad, and we propose to reduce our ability to grow food securely with irrigation year in, year out.

With our own farming practices we can demonstrate through different techniques productivity gains can be achieved with smarter irrigation and management. Irrigation upgrades via the current trading of water savings is a good start and is an area where more focus is needed. These new technologies are not low-cost to buy and install and also need good management to optimise the benefits. With the reduction of funding for the State Department of Agriculture it gets harder to get independent advice which can be important with the management of these new systems.

Management of this environmental water is also a concern as from what we see locally, far too many decisions are made by people who live away from areas of importance and more locals need a greater input into management of these areas. They watch what happens daily to sensitive areas as well as have generational knowledge of the local environment that you can't teach in a university. A local observer would have the ability to act quickly if a looming disaster would seem to be imminent.

Apart from recent infrastructure upgrades of water controllers the channels haven't seen any change for the 55+ years since built. Murray Irrigation has made many changes since privatisation, but to upgrade this system would require outside funds to improve this out-dated system .Farming systems have made big changes and it is time for the delivery systems to catch up with it so water losses through evaporation and seepage can be minimalized.

In conclusion, we hope our submission is of some help to your committee and if you could see the opportunity to visit our area in the future we would gladly get together other very knowledgeable farmers of our area to meet with you to discuss the reality of Irrigation in the Murray Darling area.

Yours faithfully

Christopher R Stillard.



Fred Stillard, constructing earth for the original irrigation channel in the area.