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REFERENCE POINTS FOR MURRAY-DARLING BASIN COMMITTEE

1. There needs to be recognition by all governments that agreements put in place and signed off by all parties after lengthy and diligent enquiries will be honoured by future governments.

We saw in this region, an agreement to reduce ground water allocations by more than 70%, concluded after negotiations with officers of the then Department of Land and Water Conservation, CSIRO and other Government Departments. These negotiations took place over nearly 10 years, and encompassed the best scientific and geological data available at the time. To the best of my knowledge, the performance of the aquifers since the implementation of those reductions has been in line with or better than the outcome predicted. We then saw last year, the body charged with advising the Government on policy for implementation of reforms to the management of the Murray-Darling Basin, recommend, without any supporting scientific data, a further reduction of 22%, of that less than 30% of our original allocation. Is it any wonder that we saw the anger, frustration and disbelief, portrayed at venue after venue in the meetings held to review the document presented by the authority. There will be no future co-operation, of Farmers with Governments in Environmental projects, unless there is a position of trust renegotiated by the Government.

2. The question of the amount of allocation for environmental flows is a very difficult one to solve, with scientific evidence to give credible support being very thin on the ground. Some of the supporting data of some "environmental groups" make incredulous reading. What I have learned over a period of 76 years is that an irrigator needs a high degree of certainty of an annual allocation to deliver a profitable budget, but that a very forgiving environment can balance a budget over a period of years. In other words whatever the figure, that is necessary to maintain river health, it doesn't have to be so much each year, but rather so much over say 4 or 5 years, which gives flexibility in allocations, and enables account to be taken of flood events.

I would be one of few if any other in this room, who can remember the Namoi river prior to the construction of Keepit Dam and prior to large scale irrigation. I wrote a letter to the land in October after the release of the Basin plan and they were kind enough to name it the letter of the week, which I think is about the peak of my literary career. What I wanted to reinforce is the perception many concerned with the riverine environment seem to hold, is that the post dam behaviour of many rivers is the natural behaviour. This is not so. The classic idillic clear flowing stream has been enhanced by the intervention of the dams, most of which were constructed for the supply of irrigation water.

3. The question of the health of the lower Murray. One can readily understand the desire of the residents of South Australia and the Coorong and Lake Alexandrina in particular to have all the economic and lifestyle activity that they have enjoyed over many years since the construction of the barrages. This has however come about by engineering development. I do not believe one can use an environmental requirement on this issue, any more credibly than the requirement to support the irrigation industry throughout the many river systems. At the very least there has to be some inquiry in to the operation of the barrages.

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## Letter of the week

# Barrages hold back river truths

THE current Murray-Darling Basin Plan, if implemented, would make a mockery of best management practices and co-operation between farmers and government agencies.

How stupid will many people appear, having worked, in some cases for two decades with dedicated officers of the then Water Resources Commission, to persuade irrigators to take voluntary reductions in licence entitlement of groundwater, in order to achieve sustainable outcomes for the environment?

Having seen those deliberations lead to enforced cuts of up to 70 per cent – even, in isolated instances, 80pc – in annual extraction entitlement, we're now told that in the Upper Namoi groundwater area, we should surrender a further 22pc of the perhaps 30pc we have left of our original allocation.

Is this really serious first class, scientific, research-based planning?

I would take issue with some of the statements made on behalf of the environment – I suspect made by many dedicated people who are not old enough to remember life on our inland river systems before any dams were constructed.

I grew up as a kid on the Namoi before there were any dams on the Namoi or Peel rivers.

We didn't have television and we practically spent most of our time, outside school hours, swimming or fishing in the Namoi.

During the years 1939 until 1947, the river was often a chain of waterholes, not a flowing stream.

During those times we caught plenty of fish and,



when the river did flow again, the fish quickly seemed to breed and replenish.

Before there was any Snowy Mountains scheme or Hume Reservoir or locks on the mighty Murray, I suspect there would also have been times when that river stopped flowing.

Certainly, the photographs of paddlesteamers stranded for years up the Darling River are proof positive that the Darling had long periods of little flow.

I further suspect that for thousands of years before the construction of the barrages on the Coorong, there would have been countless times when the Lower Murray looked very similar to the state it was in before the recent rain.

From the 1950s on, partly due to better than average

seasons and partly due to the operation of the dams, we all came to believe those peacefully flowing streams, about a quarter or a half a banker, were the normal state of the river.

This is a fallacy.

The storages, built primarily for irrigation, have upgraded the perception of nature's delivery.

I do not know of anybody who wants an unhealthy river system.

But in deciding what that is, and how we can develop it without bankrupting the country, individuals or country communities, we deserve better than the current basin plan.

**BILL WEAKLEY,**  
former president,  
Upper Namoi Ground Water  
Users Association.