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Tony Windsor MP

Chair of the House of Representatives

Regional Australia Committee

Dear Mr Windsor

Please find attached for your information copies of two documents as handed to the Michael Taylor, Chair of the Basin Authority, after the public consultation meeting held in Bourke on 5 November 2010.

The Education Report was a speech prepared for the meeting, but not given as I couldn't get to the microphone. Page five contains some personal comments added early on the day of the meeting.

The Basin Plan Proposal document covers the history of the Barwon-Darling System's water sharing and associated issues since 1974 as relevant background to the proposed Plan.

I submit these two documents for your consideration.

Sincerely

Allan Amos

President

## **MURRAY DARLING BASIN PLAN EDUCATION REPORT**

There are six schools in the Bourke area, comprising State Primary, Secondary and Distance Education Campuses, St Ignatius Catholic Primary School, Pacific Outback Primary School and the Koinonia Christian Academy that provides both Primary and Secondary education.

Bourke has already experienced the impacts of water cuts from those already imposed by the NSW Government through its development of their Barwon-Darling Cap Management Strategy from the early 2000's and subsequent implementation in 2007.

Although irrigators were aware of probable cuts to their licensed water allocations for some years before implementation, their first advice as to the actual magnitude of these was not received until 2006. This resulted in a scaling back of irrigation plantings and in the case of two large developments, receivers being appointed by the banks.

Probably the hardest hit by these measures was the Pacific Outback school located 20 km west of Bourke in the centre of the main irrigation development. Mr Peter Hawkins, the current Principal, has advised that the student population numbered 118 in 2006 when they operated both primary and secondary departments. Student numbers continued to drop from that time and they had to close their secondary department last year.

Presently, Pacific Outback has only 14 students left. Mr Hawkins estimates that he would attribute 60-70 of the students lost were due to the water cut-backs. Due to the uncertainty of future enrolments, the school's Management Committee decided only last week to close the school at the end of this year. It is likely that the threat of further water cut-backs as proposed in the Murray Darling Basin plan would have been a factor in their deliberations.

I am President of the Koinonia Christian Academy and have consulted the Academy's Annual School Census records collected each August and supplied under legislation to the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Training.

In the 1990's, the Academy had its maximum ever enrolments of 48. In 2002, there were 40 students. This fell to 32, 22, 18, and then 12 in 2006. This was parallel to the slump in the irrigation industry and followed the trend of the 2006 Commonwealth Census which identified a population drop of 800 in the preceding five years. Since then, mainly due to increased indigenous enrolments, numbers have been 15, 16, 15, but has dropped again this year to only 10.

Therese Clancy, the Principal of St Ignatius School, said that they had a student body of 240 in 2000 and this dropped to 68 in 2006 reflecting the impact of the drought. Therese said that putting it simply - no water, no work! The school's numbers have picked up somewhat since 2006, but it is feared that if there are further water cut backs, a similar situation to drought will occur.

St Ignatius has families where one partner works in the irrigation or associated industry, the other in the town. If either of the two becomes unemployed, the family will leave town. Also, Therese is concerned with two issues; the first being that falling numbers means that staff will have to be sacrificed, and secondly, that with no work in the town, the incentive is lost for students to gain an education.

Wendy Hay, Principal of the Bourke-Walgett Distance Education Centre, considers that the proposed plan will impact all schools as people leave the area. The flow on effect will reduce town services and, as it becomes too difficult to live in these towns, people will leave. Wendy feels the greatest impact will be in the Walgett area where property sizes are smaller. Because Distance Education is mainly to grazing families, they haven't had significant student reductions.

Since 2000, enrolments have continued to fall at the Bourke High School according to Principal Bruce Buxton. They have 160 students at present and have lost about 80 in recent years. The school educates students for jobs. If there are no jobs, then they are just wasting their time.

Kylie Pennell, Principal of the Bourke Primary School, sees the impact of the Basin Plan affecting the whole community. The Primary School had 300 students in 2000/2001 when Paul Loxley was Principal. It now has only 200 students.

Overall, a conservative estimate is that at least 400 students have been lost from the Bourke Schools since the beginning of the drought and water cuts being introduced by the NSW Government.

To sum up, it is quite apparent from the data collected that school enrolments in Bourke are impacted by water losses, whether by drought or governmental cut-backs of water allocations. This same outcome would be observed if all the schools from Mungindi to Menindee were surveyed, as all are River dependent.

Further water access reductions as proposed under this plan for the Barwon-Darling River System can only reduce town populations, causing job losses including teachers, demoralize students regarding their job prospects, cause some schools to close as we have already seen in the case of Pacific Outback, and eventually leave dysfunctional communities. For these reasons, the schools in Bourke reject the proposed plan as it pertains to our River System.

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This concludes the schools report, but I would like to add a few personal comments. Our Prime Minister, Mz Julia Gillard was reported last night on the news regarding the big banks raising their interest rates above that bench marked by the Reserve Bank. She said that people should march with their feet. In effect, Mz Gillard was saying that she considered the action taken by the banks was immoral.

If our Prime Minister, the leader of our country was here to-day, she would complement all those from Bourke and those from upstream and downstream who marched with their feet in this morning's rally.

Also, just imagine if Mz Gillard was standing in my shoes to-day. She has spent 32 years running up and down the banks of the Barwon-Darling River System and the intersecting streams flowing into it to collect water samples and read gauges. ( And who in this room has done more?) Also, in that time, she has spent about 15 years in consultation and meetings to bench mark the existing water extraction regime to obtain a credible balance between the social, environmental and economic parameters. I think the Prime Minister's message to this meeting would be that to further cut water extractions below that already bench marked would be immoral.

(If applauded) I don't need your applause, but - I do need these representatives of the Murray Darling Basin Authority to go back and review this Plan to make sure that there is a just outcome.

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# **MURRAY DARLING BASIN PLAN PROPOSAL**

## **SOME THOUGHTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

### **WATER QUANTITY**

Bourke is located roughly in the middle of the Barwon-Darling River System and the following comments will address basically just this system as it is where we live and what we know. It needs to be reminded that flows along this River System are event based, being totally dependent on rainfall in the catchment. Flows are generally generated in the catchment upstream of Bourke which comprises 5% or 1/20<sup>th</sup> of the land mass of Australia. Historically, the system has been characterized by repeated cycles of drought and flood with these cycles having no predictability.

Consequently, flows can vary between over 500 000 ML/d as in 1864, 1890 and 1976, these being in order the three highest floods recorded, and cease to flow. Usually, there are long periods when the River levels do not meet the thresholds at which irrigation extractions can take place.

Irrigators have been targeted by the media and others as environmental vandals robbing all the water indiscriminately from the System. What is not understood by the majority of the population is that irrigation is strictly controlled by conditions imposed by way of licensing.

When the NSW Government realized that the brakes needed to put on irrigation development in 1988, it organized for the various Water User Associations along the System from Mungindi to Wilcannia to meet with its Water Department representatives under the umbrella of the Mungindi-Menindee Water Users Association to consider a new Water Licensing Policy. After considerable consultation this was implemented in 1991.

The two main features of this scheme were the imposition of flow heights at which irrigation could commence and annual volumetric extraction limits, the maximum for broadacre crops around Bourke and downstream being 20 ML/ha. The volumetric extraction limits were based on Departmental work done under its Water Efficiency and River Basin Audit program conducted from 1986 until the mid-1990's. This program collected data on irrigation, town water supply, industrial and stock and domestic water usage along the entire length of the System and compared this with flows measured at gauging stations. The accuracy of this data was significantly improved with the introduction of water meters in 1991. Further sophistication on the understanding of flows in the System occurred from about 2000 with the development of computer modeling.

Following the massive blue-green algae episode of 1991 when about 1500 km of the River turned green over about a six week period, the System came under the spotlight of environmental and water scientists from NSW, Victoria and the ACT.

In addition to the two main features of the 1991 Water Licensing Policy, an Interim Unregulated Flow Management Plan for the North-West was adopted in June 1992 to introduce targets for riparian flows, algal suppression flows and fish migration flows; these taking precedence over normal license conditions when required by the then NSW Department of Water Resources.

The rigorous work of the scientific community started in 1991 culminated in a bus trip of 'Scientists on Safari' along the length of the System in 1996. Following this, a detailed joint report of their findings was published. Also in 1996, a rapid fall in river levels caused banks to slump and trees to fall into the river, particularly in the reaches from Brewarrina to Tilpa.



In the early to mid-1990's, another group was formed to ensure that action was taken to modify license conditions. This group, the Barwon-Darling River Management Committee, met over roughly a ten year period and had over 40 delegates with representation from all the key stakeholders - Government Departments such as the Environment Protection Authority, NSW Fisheries, Department of Land and Water Conservation; the Shires of Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke, Cobar and Central Darling; the Western Catchment Management Authority; Murdi-Paarki Regional Council (an Indigenous group) and the Mungindi-Menindee Advisory Council.

In addition to stakeholder inputs, the Barwon-Darling River Management Committee also called on expert advice from the various environmental and water scientists who had carried out research along the River System before making recommendations that affected licenses for irrigation, town water supply, industrial and stock and domestic water purposes. Strict consideration was given to the social, economic and environmental impacts before these recommendations were made and later implemented.

The most dramatic outcome was the implementation of environmental flow rules in September 2000 which resulted in the flow thresholds at which the various classes of pumps could be started were greatly increased to allow more water to flow to the lower reaches of the System for environmental benefits. For example, the flow rate for the larger B Class licenses irrigation licenses usually servicing 162 ha areas were lifted from 390 ML/d to 1150 ML/d at Bourke.

To stop further extractions taking place along the River System, 'No Further Development' conditions were imposed on licenses in January 2001 and not lifted until June 2007. Effectively, this meant that unused licenses, called 'Sleeper Licenses' could not be activated.

During the early to mid-2000's, work initiated by the Barwon-Darling River Management Committee and then extended by the various NSW water departments brought in the Barwon-Darling Cap Management Strategy to comply with the requirements of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission. Licensees were advised of their proposed cap volumetric allocations in 2006 and their licenses amended to comply with these new requirements in June 2007. Under this regime, active irrigators with a long-term history of use had their annual volumetric extraction limits cut by approximately 45%. The inactive sleeper licenses had their limits cut by 77.5%. The average cuts were in the order of 67%.

## **WATER QUALITY**

Regular water sampling commenced about 1975 at Bourke under the Surface Water Quality Assessment Programme. The areas targeted for sampling were greatly extended and made more comprehensive following the blue-green algal bloom of 1991. Stations all along the Barwon-Darling were then regularly monitored. Also, the Narran, Bokhara, Birrie, Culgoa, Warrego and Paroo rivers were monitored when flow events occurred in these streams.

In addition to samples being taken for the usual parameters of electrical conductivity, temperature, total phosphorus, total nitrogen, algae, pH and turbidity, there were some lengthy periods of bacteria and pesticide residue sampling conducted in the 1990's.

From about 1998 to the early 2000's, the Department of Land and Water Conservation had two full-time water quality officers stationed in Bourke. Because of the large amount of water quality data collected over some 40 years, the Department of Natural Resources felt there was little to be gained by carrying out further monitoring and abandoned sampling programmes in 2006/7 when staff was no longer available. The Western Catchment Management Committee is believed to have carried on some further monitoring for a year or two and also abandoned sampling.

In 1991, the media was publicizing that the Darling River was “dead”. The then Director of the NSW Department of Water Resources, Mr Peter Millington, publicly stated that he believed that it had just had a heart attack. Recent indications are that he was correct. Dr John Harris of the NSW Fisheries Research commented in the 1990’s that the best indicator of river health was fish and if present fish numbers are anything to go on, then this River is quite healthy, needing no more interference from governments.

An environmental health initiative along the Barwon-Darling System developed as a result of the water quality monitoring has been the construction of the \$6 million Upper Darling Salt Interception Scheme located near Weir 19A roughly 30 km downstream of Bourke. This scheme is estimated to prevent 40,000 tonnes of salt from entering the Darling River each year to improve water quality downstream.

### **IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY**

Once the Barwon-Darling Cap Management Strategy became well developed and it could be seen that it would eventually be implemented, the financial institutions became nervous and banks started foreclosure procedures by appointing receivers. This has resulted in two major irrigators losing their properties, Mr Neville Simpson and the Mansell families’ Back O’ Bourke Fruits Pty Ltd. Both properties were operated by two generations of their respective families.

It is interesting that our local Western Herald newspaper has been running advertisements for the Australian Government over the last few weeks promoting irrigation water use efficiency as part of this Basin Plan proposal. Back O’ Bourke Fruits heavily invested in state of the art computerized drip irrigation making it the most efficient irrigator along the whole Barwon-Darling System and it was the first casualty of NSW’s Barwon-Darling Cap Management Strategy.

In the 2006 Commonwealth Census, the population in the Bourke area fell by 800 and more people have left town since then. Although some of this attrition can be attributed to the drought that commenced in 2001, the main factor has been the demise of the irrigation industry with the large number of permanent workers that it employed. The reduction in seasonal workers has also impacted the Bourke economy.

On the experience of the number of jobs lost in Bourke, this Basin Plan's estimate of only 800 jobs being lost from the multitude of communities affected is farcical.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, the Basin Plan is considered to be so significantly flawed by its conclusions on social impacts that any reasonable person could have no confidence in the methodology used to propose water cut-backs and would therefore have to reject them.

With the cut-backs in water access already applied by the NSW Government to water users along the Barwon-Darling River System, it is strongly felt that further cuts to water extractions along this System would be an abhorrent imposition causing considerable social upheaval, virtually crippling communities.

It may be acceptable to claw back water from other river basins where there have been no cut-backs, but not for this one. It has already made sufficient sacrifices and suffered the consequent pain and emotional trauma over some long number of years. On this basis, our plea for the well-being of communities along the Barwon-Darling System is that the proposal to impose 14 to 18% water cuts be abandoned.

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