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SOUTH WEST ANGLERS ASSOCIATION INC

The South West Anglers Association Inc is an Association of Recreational Angling Clubs in the South West and Riverina regions of NSW. It is made up of some 22 independent clubs and represents the interests of approximately 2,500 individual members. The following is a summary of the thoughts of that membership on the Guide to the Proposed Draft Plan for the Murray Darling Basin.

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The South West Anglers Association Inc, incorporating Recreational Angling Clubs in the South West and Riverina regions of NSW has great concerns with the MDBA guide to the proposed Basin Plan released Friday 8th October 2010.

It is of great concern and indeed bordering on the ridiculous that this process has come so far and yet is still to investigate the social and economic impacts on the communities that are most at the mercy of this plan. It was only after the anger from the communities became obvious that moves were made to appoint consultants to further study the community impacts.

Further to ridiculous was the claims the proposals would result in job losses of 800, with many experts claiming the figure would be closer to 8 to 10 thousand we see no need to comment further on that stupidity.

Our concerns are not just for the fish that inhabit the rivers but also of communities of our members that have contributed significantly to the increasing numbers of native fish and also the health of the river system.

It is the members of these communities that have engaged in habitat restoration and native fish stocking programs, as well as assisting with Fisheries monitoring and research activities.

The rivers in this region are not dead or dying as some scientists and media might like to have inner city voters believe, but are in fact a healthy home to a great number of native aquatic wildlife.

We have had drought for approximately the past ten years and it has now hopefully broken. We are now experiencing flooding as has been the nature of the Australian landscape for centuries. These conditions will as we historically are more than aware produce abundant growth and fire dangers and yet Government agencies have failed to recognise that this was about to happen.

The declaration of the Red Gum National Parks and the removal of the cattle grazing and the timber industries that have sustainably managed these areas for the past 150 years will have far greater adverse impacts on the river and native fish than the irrigation industry.

To suggest that delivering vast amounts of water to the Red Gums will solve the problems is a flawed belief and more consideration must be given to the intervals between flows. The River Red Gums do not need constant flooding but a drink every four years or so would be ample.

If we are to keep the Murray River in a healthy and improving state then we must dismiss the “lock it up and leave it “ management practices, we must return these areas to sensible, sustainable and local based management.

The notion that we must stop irrigators and flood the region on a frequent basis is not the cure many believe in, but could in fact bring about the death of the very assets that the extreme environmentalists are trying to “save.”

While some might say that the additional water to the environment should be in the best interests of fishers, this Association feels that it is not just the quantity of water delivered down the rivers that counts for our native fish, but the manner that the water is managed. This in the past has not been managed well by the MDBA and others concerned and there is growing opinion that many of the “environmental flows” of the past have in fact had a much more damaging impact on natives than the benefits we are expected to believe.

Environmental flows in the past have been all about the quantity of water that is required to satisfy Governments and conservationists and are measured in mega litres rather than benefit to the real environment.

We have all too often witnessed artificial flows that have resulted in black water events that have caused significant fish kills in our western flowing rivers. These events have had a far greater negative impact on native fish than all the droughts and floods that are a normal part of the real environment in this part of the country.

In preference to “feel good” measures that send water down the river, more attention needs to be focused on preventing those blackwater events by controlled releases that either dilute or by-pass critical habitat locations.

While some might rejoice in the full Dams such as Lake Hume, we as anglers are now bracing for the releases of low oxygenated and unseasonably cold water. The issues of thermal pollution have been well documented in the past but due to the low levels of the dams in recent years this has not been an issue.

Little has been done to address this major problem for native fish during this period of low dam levels.

Perhaps we were to believe that the dams would never fill again.

Most anglers in this region are impressed and supportive of the Hume to the Sea Fishways Project. We see initiatives such as this to be of far greater importance to native fish than the taking of water from irrigators for environmental flows.

We see the freedom of fish passage to be one of the most critical of objectives and believe that the allocation of funding for this project should increase, the time frame shortened, and the project should be expanded to all weirs and locks in the Basin as soon as possible.

We are currently spending 59 million dollars in the Koondrook-Pericoota Forest installing structures and channels to divert water and control flows from the Murray River into the forest to mimic natural flooding, the same document states that we then need to artificially stimulate the native fish to leave the area prior to draining.

Strange how our native fish never get stranded in these areas after natural flooding. Is this another example of conservation measures meddling with our real natural environment?

While native fish have gained ascendancy over the European Carp problem to some extent during the drought conditions, we need to be aware that these artificial acts of flooding are a recipe for the next explosion in Carp numbers.

Another unbelievable situation is the desire to flood the Lower Lakes (Albert and Alexandrina) with quality freshwater from further up the Basin.

While conservationists are continually calling for things to be put back "the way they were" by locking up areas into National Parks and creating Marine Parks all around the country, we never hear any calling for the Lower Lakes to put back "the way they were" and just letting the ocean in to do what it did for centuries.

Prior to 1940 the Lakes and the Coorong were subject to the tidal influence and were never freshwater lakes, why then are we wasting freshwater that can be used for agriculture in more productive areas.

The Lower Lakes account for 750gl to 950gl per annum in evaporation and this figure accounts for almost a third of the evaporation Basin wide.

This amount alone accounts for 15/20 % of the proposed reductions to irrigators.

Compare this to the 60gl from Lake Hume, a highly productive management facility.

We believe that the barrages should be removed; the Lower Lakes were historically tidal and should be returned to that state as soon as possible.

The proposals to install a weir at Wellington must be fully investigated and we believe implemented.

Industries and communities that rely on the "freshwater" from the Lakes could be delivered far better quality water via pipelines and costs offset by the value of the water currently wasted in the Lakes, being better utilised.

While evaporation is an important part of the climatic cycles, the influx of seawater would continue to supply that resource.

The water in storage has been a critical factor in maintaining flows in many of our river systems during the drought period and that situation will occur again in future years.

This Association believes that due to growing demands by industry, agriculture and the growing populations in some regional areas, together with the environmental needs, serious considerations must be given to expanding our water storages.

Our preference would be for a new dam.

However in saying that, if our water managers and politicians cannot overcome the prejudices of the extreme green and environmental movements, then at least have the courage to further investigate the expansion of dams such as William Hovel and Buffalo.

As to Buffalo, the land was acquired many years back (during initial construction) and an extension to the wall would be cost effective and provide considerable water storage in a catchment that has seen extreme flooding in recent times.

It would also compensate in some way for the destruction of Lake Mokoan for what can only be described as vague reasons.

The reason given to us was that it be turned into a wetland because of excessive evaporation. Perhaps we missed the part that said wetlands do not evaporate.

We also question the fact that there is not enough water in the system to support the production of food to feed our nation as well as the environment, but there is enough to send

water down the North-South Pipeline to flush toilets and fill spa baths in Melbourne. Lake Eildon has struggled for many years to cope with the demands of the Goulburn system and then we are told the water to Melbourne is from “savings” It is our belief that any savings should be returned to where they came and not used for Political gain by a knee-jerk reaction to what is proving to be normal drought patterns in this country.

The taking of water from the irrigation industry will have little impact on the quality of water without astute management and quality controls outside that industry.

The MDBA has on many occasions talked of the salinity problems in the Basin and has declared it a major issue.

South Australian scientists have declared the Murray River a saline drain.

It therefore beggars belief that the MDBA can, along with the EPA, sign off on a flawed proposal to discharge each year some 1,500 tonnes of salt along with heavy metals into the Murray River at Albury through the disposal of industrial effluent from the Norske-Skog paper mill.

The so called off-set program at the Billabong Creek bore facility was totally flawed with the Billabong at the time being totally dry and the bore discharge only charging a few kilometres of the creek before it vanished back into the underground aquifers that it was pumped from. Little help to the Murray River.

This Association is supportive of the irrigation industry and more importantly the communities that revolve around it. We believe that the irrigators have over the past couple of decades made giant strides in conservation and better utilisation of the resource. Although the Murray Darling Basin annually only receives 6% of Australia’s rainfall, the efficiency of the farming sector allows them to generate 40% of Australian agricultural production. (ABS 1301-0 2008)

Australian farmers are leading the world in best farming practices and should be encouraged and applauded, rather than punished for being competitive producers of the nations food supplies.

This Association believes that the MDBA, along with the relevant Governments, needs to return to square one on this issue as the proposals as stated are flawed, discriminatory and totally unworkable in the present form.

We have lost confidence in this organisation and seriously question their motives and the directions they are taking our great river system.

We strongly recommend that the MDBA be restructured to incorporate a wider representative base of affected users in our communities.

Terry Maloney Secretary South West Anglers Association Inc