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Submission – Murray Darling Basin Plan Inquiry
John Williams MP, Member for Murray Darling

I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Regional Australia for the opportunity to comment on the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

As the State Member for Murray Darling my communities are spread across a number of rivers on the Murray Darling Basin, which include the Murray, Murrumbidgee, Lachlan, Darling and Paroo Rivers.

A common problem relating to any community in these systems is that their futures are left uncertain. The combination of the drought, water reform and buybacks has left these communities brittle and floundering for future direction.

I have spent the last three and a half years with these communities as they battled through the worst drought recorded in history and have understood and felt their pain and suffering. My previous employment was as a motor dealer for 28 years in Broken Hill and in that time watched the mining industry divest 6000 employees as the mining industry went into a gradual decline.

Unless you have experienced that trapped feeling of outside elements destroying your income and investment you would have great difficulty realising the great load the proposed SDL's place on the strained morale and financial resources of the farmers and businesses in these communities. The breaking of the drought offered renewed hope of recovery only to be clouded by yet another threat to their future existence.

It is unfortunate that media commentary on the Murray Darling Basin is so negative and for all intent is driven primarily by local comment that in most cases is incorrect, misguided or politically driven.

The state of the rivers in the Murray Darling Basin is driven by myth as the primi factor and the ability to play the blame game. Within the debate there is no consideration of extracting the truth from the people who have lived on and relied on the river system.

In addition, the Murray Darling Basin plan and the formation of the Murray Darling Basin Authority, to most observers appears as another stage of water reform in the basin, with the future view of what's next?

The people in the Murray Darling Basin are well versed in water reform. Following the national water initiative, communities were faced with the living Murray, water for rivers, followed by State and Federal Government purchases. One

would think that the combined effect of all this reform still has not yet achieved enough environmental water within the guide to the Murray Darling Basin Plan. Little acknowledgement has been given to the past interventions in the guide to the MDBP.

Given that the Murray Darling Basin is coming out of an extended drought it could be suggested when normal flows resume that the effect of these past cutbacks and purchases could in time substantially effect the flows in the rivers in the Basin.

Fortunately the MDBA is honest enough to recognise that the science behind the SDL benchmarks is not quantitative and could contain unforeseen flaws. The historical data that supplements the baseline calculations without doubt could also contain underestimations of flow and a possibility to skew future SDL's.

Only in the last few years has a true commitment in accounting for water in the basin been acknowledged. Contained in this accounting has been the introduction of accurate measuring of water used in irrigation combined with the improvements in accurate measurement has been the recognition of water theft, and change to the penalties that apply to this theft. There has never been any data established in regard to the volume of water stolen from the basin.

The MDBA's guide has failed to recognise that within the irrigating communities, water is delivered to irrigators through a network of channels or pipelines. These associations rely on the support of a continual chain of irrigators so the fixed and the variable costs of supply are socialised amongst the water customers along that network. Government purchases of indiscriminate parcels of entitlements from networks place a greater burden on existing customers and at some point create a cost burden beyond the capacity of remaining customers to financially support.

In the past the federal government has refused to negotiate with willing sellers who could effectively see a large parcel of entitlements purchased and a complete network retired which provide a 'win win' situation for all concerned. The federal government still refuses to acknowledge this action that would be considered socially responsible.

In addition, the variability of river flows is subject to a range of conditions that alter flows other than what is introduced via the upper catchments. The wetting down process became clearly evident when the drought started to break and huge volumes of water were consumed in the wetting down of dry banks and in the unregulated streams the wetting down of the river bed, which had in some cases been dry for over four years. Local rainfall events that had not occurred in some places for over 7 years have had a big impact on flow improvement and resumption.

While I understand this cycle is all part of the average annual flows the extended drought provided the worst scenario in recent recorded history and would no doubt create an anomaly in the benchmark calculations.

Within the basin communities there exists scepticisms towards independent government appointed bodies. History suggests the government of the day has appointed independent bodies to reach prescribed and pre-determined outcomes. No doubt the interference of the Wentworth Group who seemed intent on foreshadowing or influencing the direction of the MDBA provides further distrust in the outlined SDL's.

The urgency to provide a solution to a perceived problem has created further distrust for the process. This urgency has also disallowed the opportunity to provide convincing argument that any change should be carried out.

I accept that all reform is difficult but within the guide I have not read any substantial or convincing information that further reform is necessary.

I have attended two forums and to date regardless of my need to represent my constituents, I have not heard any convincing information that would lead me to advocate for a new reform agenda within the river regions I represent.

Of greater concern is a recent announcement by Julia Gillard suggesting that the legislation regarding the Murray Darling Basin plan will go ahead by 2011/2012 at the latest. This is clear evidence that the situation is now political and the federal government's desire to be seen as a reformist government. The people in the Murray Darling Basin have become soft targets for an unproven, untried reform.

Haste is not the answer and decisions need to take place in a river environment that reflects the norm.

Yours sincerely

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