



Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia
Inquiry into the impact of the
Murray-Darling Basin Authority “Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan”

The Jackson Group has considered the Guide to the Basin Plan and we appreciate the opportunity to submit our comments to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia. The Group is an informal team of eleven people who live in Northern Victoria, within the Murray-Darling Basin. More than half are irrigation farmers and the majority are, or have been, Directors on Boards of Water Authorities and /or Catchment Authorities. All of us have a strong desire to restore the balance between the environment and the consumptive use of water across the entire Murray-Darling Basin.

Firstly, we believe that the 2007 Water Act has the right intent and has been developed around principles that should deliver a sustainable future for the Basin. We support the Act in its current form. Some of our Group would prefer that the volume of water entitlement returned to the environment be closer to 7600GL. However the consensus view is that 3000 - 4000 GL is the absolute minimum that should be returned. We are also concerned that the impacts of climate change may be more severe than has been assumed in the Guide, and in that event, the return volume of 3000 - 4000 GL would be very inadequate. It is essential that a clear time frame and terms of reference for future reviews of environmental water requirements be locked into the Basin Plan.

In addressing the Terms of Reference of the Committee, we submit the following;

- The economic and social issues have been highlighted by many communities as requiring further investigation, and we agree. However, our Group reiterates that the environment should take precedence and social and economic consequences should be managed with a transition program and, if necessary, staged implementation of the return of water to the environment. There has been much comment about the negative impacts on the economy and social well being of the Basin, but this needs to be balanced by the considerable positive benefits, particularly long term. For example, the full economic benefit of eco system services provided by healthy rivers is believed to be in excess of \$2.1bn. These eco system services include flushing and dilution of contaminants, providing a buffer to climate change impacts, support of native flora and fauna, pest control and aesthetic improvement for tourists and indigenous communities. Many people claim that the return of 3000 - 4000 GL of water to the environment will lead to the demise of many small towns. In reality many of these towns are already shrinking and losing services because of other factors such as better communication (internet), faster transport, lack of education and health services, etc. All of the Jackson Group members live near, or in, a small town within the Basin and have observed the ongoing changes to small community structures.

- For the environment to acquire the minimum of 3000 to 4000GL entitlement, all options should be considered, including buy back (willing sellers), infrastructure

upgrades and on farm efficiency incentives. An integrated approach, on a regional basis, is needed to get the best outcome in obtaining water by these three options. There may be value in having longer term carryover options for environmental entitlements. In the buyback of water, the Governments should target low productivity areas and be prepared to pay a premium for water from these areas. The Campaspe Irrigation District and Torrumbarry Irrigation Area, in Victoria, are examples where community cooperation has supported beneficial purchases. In the Victorian irrigation areas the infrastructure access fees, associated with water purchased for the environment, should be amortized and bought out by a lump sum payment to the Water Authority.

- As part of the adjustment/transition programs there should be research and development projects focused on increasing productivity - aiming for twice the production using half the water on half the land. A rapid rate of adjustment to agriculture throughout the Basin is required to deliver the water to the environment before the rivers are irrecoverably damaged. Therefore substantial Government funding for agricultural research and extension services is required to facilitate the changes needed to meet the Basin timetable.

Other Comments on the Draft Basin Plan

Most observers would conclude that the recent round of meetings on the Guide to the Basin Plan was generally not a positive process of consultation with the community. Poor leadership by many of our elected representatives, in the three tiers of Government, has not helped the process. The Jackson Group believes that future steps in consultation should primarily involve existing organisations, and avoid large open public meetings. Examples of existing organisations in Northern Victoria are Catchment Management Authorities and their committees, Water Authorities and irrigation Water Service Committees, Environment Victoria and Regional Environment Groups, VFF Water Users Committee and other agricultural industry groups, Municipal Associations of Victoria, etc. It is also suggested that representatives from these existing groups could be invited to be part of a Basin Forum. The strength of local communities should be utilised. Another critical element of effective consultation is the dissemination of accurate information. This can be improved through advertisements and fact sheets releases via the various media. This would be greatly reinforced if there was non partisan political support of the Basin Plan at Federal Government level.

There has recently been some public comment about the prospect of sacrificing much of the riverine and wetlands environment throughout the Basin and thus requiring less environmental water to only save priority sites. Such an approach would be a pathetic cop out by our decision makers.

We urge all political leaders to present the Basin Plan as the environmental, social and economic positive it undoubtedly is for Murray-Darling Basin. The process set out in the Act needs to be clearly outlined to Basin communities and also include the political process post delivery of the plan to Government.

The intent of the Plan was correct in 2007 and the need has been magnified following experiences since that date. The benefits of planning for the long term, rather than for short term expediency, needs to be promoted.

We wish to give evidence at the planned Bendigo session in January 2011 if this can be arranged.

Jackson Group contact ;

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