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19 December 2010

The Secretary  
Parliamentary Committee

Dear Sir/Madam

Please see following my submission for your interest.

I have kept away from many of the big picture items, choosing to highlight some of the lesser matters which later in fact influence outcomes.

Please feel free to contact me at any time, in regard to any of the enclosed.

Yours faithfully

Gilbert E. Silby

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## (1) AUTHOR PROFILE

Gilbert E Silby (Gil), age seventy one years, location - Finley, NSW.

Migrated from Gippsland to the Riverina thirty five years ago, with my wife Beverly and three now adult sons.

Real Estate Agent for thirty years, twenty five years as owner/operator employing six people, until retirement three years ago.

Coaxed out of retirement, now a casual agent for a National Company.

Water broker for more than twenty years.

Has no financial interest in any rural land.

Is especially familiar with the Murray River and flood plains, from Albury to Barham, has a lesser knowledge of the river from Barham to South Australia and the Murrumbidgee Valley.

## (2) THE DEBATE SO FAR

- The quantity of water for future Environmental uses seems to me to be based on "think of a figure" and varies enormously.

Surely two gigalitres per year would be more than enough.

Where are the proposed programs that justify the huge quantities bandied about?

- The MDBA doesn't seem to have made use of the many people and/or organisations who have vast practical experience in these matters.
- The "Movers and Shakers" seem hurt that the debate has moved to Social and Economic matters. They shouldn't, they had the field to themselves for years.
- The Wentworth Group, see later references.
- There is genuine wide spread outrage in Basin Communities re: "The Plan".
- There seems to be little respect for food producers in "The Plan".

Ultimately the decisions made will be political, pure and simple.

### (3) THE ENVIRONMENT NOW

#### A laymans view

It seems to me that the Murray River is at present in great shape.

The Red Gums that had held in so well during the drought, have recovered well and look terrific. Only a very small percentage died, as they would have in any similar prolonged drought.

Only 10% of Murray River salt originates in NSW. State and Regional Authorities have set high standards for those in stewardship of the land and landowners have responded extremely well.

I have tested the water at Morgan in S.A. and its good, nothing like it was twenty five years ago.

Fisherman on the Murray report good catches of native fish and plenty that got away. The river is certainly nothing like a Research group claimed a few years ago - that there were no fish at all. The biggest environmental negative is that noxious animal the European Carp. Any serious attempt at culling numbers should be applauded.

### (4) EMPLOYMENT

The MDBA guidelines stated that there would only be labour losses of about eight hundred, across the Catchment.

This astounds me and I can hardly believe that anyone would take that figure seriously.

Example: the Deniliquin Rice Mill put way over one hundred people out of work when it closed.

Now they are partially re-opening and will be re-hiring at least ninety. If one town of eight thousand people could have such a numerical effect, imagine it over the whole catchment.

Question: Does "The Plan" have other such howlers?

## (5) DIFFERENCES

I can't help feeling that many of our movers and shakers think that one size fits all. Our regions have different soil and climate environments, one size can't fit all.

Agriculture is a great example. There is a constant move forward to challenge, change and develop new productive methods and machinery.

Almost any professional consultant will tell you, that there is always a "few" blokes out there, setting a cracking pace. Agriculture is really a big seething pot of ideas and achievements.

An example of technological change, was the speed that Irrigation farmers took up the use of laser beam technology, about thirty years ago. The Building Industry was years behind.

The trick is how to leave the Innovators boiling along without squeezing and yet leaving space for "Mr Average".

The big picture implication is that your Committee will hopefully recommend enough flexibility to accommodate different regions.

## (6) THE MURRAY RIVER

It could be argued that the Indigenous community has a deep and mystical attachment to the River, however observers should never underestimate the pull or empathy that all residents of the Valley have with their lifeblood, the Murray.

You see, we produce from its water, we swim in it, boat, fish, water ski, play with our kids, feel refreshed by it, lounge under the trees, but above all we respect the River.

Overwhelmingly people would not do anything to harm or damage "the River".

Our Economic well being is closely related to and dependent upon Murray Valley water.

Old photos and word of mouth history tell us that there are vastly more red gums trees on the flood plain now than there were around 1900.

(6) THE MURRAY RIVER con't

Other facets worth noting is that the River has another major use - it is a drain. How many people know that a flood at Albury takes eight weeks to reach the Murray mouth. An Albury spring flood, is a summer flood at the mouth.

A flight over the flood plain will show that the river has changed course dozens of times, erosion and build up have always been common to it.

Witness the beautiful sandy beaches between Yarrawonga and Barmah.

## (7) RIVER RED GUMS

One can't help but be fascinated by River Red Gums, but believe that many Conservationists are yet to understand its culture.

Its seed is very hard and may wait in the ground for thirty years before being "soaked" to grow.

After this recent long drought and then flood, hundreds of thousands of young trees will emerge but they will be too thick for many to survive. Ideally later they would be thinned, however in huge forests that is probably not practical.

River gums can stand floods for months yet still survive years of drought. Look for a gnarled old tree anywhere and you are seeing a tree that's lived through a drought or three or five.

The power to recuperate in this species is amazing. They drop whole limbs on boiling hot days, somehow live through bush fires and produce magnificent timber when harvested.

## (8) RIVER MANAGEMENT

While management of all rivers will be required, there is currently a mish mash of activity.

I can't recall having heard a simple plan (or difficult) spelled out, in regard to the Murray River.

Will "Environment" water gradually fill the dams, thus crowding out irrigation water.

In recent years we have had translucent flows. This strange technique was to let as much water out as flowed in. A very strange thing to do partway through Spring.

A few years ago when the wall of the Hume dam was considered unsafe, much water was released to ease the pressure.

This created minor flooding down stream, for weeks.

The flood wasn't high enough to benefit most of the flood plain, but got the MDBA in lots of trouble with land owners on the river between Albury and Corowa.

(8) RIVER MANAGEMENT con't

The Landholders took legal action against the MDBA, alleging damage and losses. The matter was settled out of court, with one farmer, I believe, garnishing about \$58,000.

I further understand that a legal arrangement was entered into for possible future events. The MDBA should disclose any commitment made, as to future river runs.

So we have numerous people claiming that the River should be "managed", it always has been.

What we need to know about is plans as to how we "manage" the Murray. Are there any plans anyway?

If the river flow is too low, the trees don't get it, if its too high what of legal action.

Is there a distinction between natural flood water and man released flood water.

It is essentially and just plain sensible that the Community get the biggest possible benefit from each megalitre released for the environment.

I understand that when the flood plain/native forest, were managed by NSW Forestry, the old time men, assessed in advance what size flood was coming. In the appropriate circumstances they then bulldozed blocks into various creek/anna branches to build up the water height, thus soaking a far bigger area.

When the water reached the top of the bulldozed wall it quickly washed away the temporary block and the water moved on to do it again.

This was crude but sensible management that had minimum negative carry over effect on the environment, yet spread water far and wide to benefit the forests.

I believe that unless similar strategies are employed much ineffectual watering will take place.

Local knowledge would be absolutely essential to maximize beneficial flood patterns.

## RIVER MANAGEMENT con't

### Questions

- Will the "Environmental Water" keep accumulating in dams, thus crowding out Irrigation water?
- If the quantity of water available, but is in excess of predetermined levels, in the event of MDBA available water exceeding that required by the Environment, will that excess water be traded on the Temporary transfer market.
- Should the MDBA be prepared to construct low level check gates for the sole purpose of maximizing water spread, in flood events.

## (9) THE WENTWORTH GROUP

Firstly, I vividly remember the ABC A.M. report, the morning after their initial meeting at Sydneys "Wentworth Hotel", from which they took their name.

The image of academics enjoying luxury cuisine, while they talk down to the masses, still sticks in my craw.

I respect their P.R. skills, but not their down to earth know how.

For years we put up with these people advising farmers to grow high value/low water use crops, such as grapes.

Farmers, who are not fools, rightly were sceptical. Hundreds of non professional farmers have lost millions of dollars.

Farmers will grow anything theres a profit in, but they are not speculators.

## (10) SUGGESTED OUTCOMES

- (1) that an absolute limit of two (2) gigalitres be set aside for environmental uses per year and that figure to include any water purchased by the Commonwealth government prior to this date.
- (2) that any future sales to the Commonwealth be geographically strategic, so that choice farmland not be deprived of irrigation water.
- (3) that the MDBA/Government lean heavily towards upgrading infrastructure as a priority.
- (4) that your committee take note of what I believe to be major management oversights as to practical future actions (see River Management)
- (5) that your committee recommend the construction of low level, low cost blocks in anna branches and creeks, within the Murray flood plain, as a management tool (see River Management).
- (6) that the MDBA establish a close working relationship with NSW National Parks, as there is now huge areas of the Murray flood plain under their control.
- (7) In the event of environment water not being required, that such water be traded on the Temporary Transfer market.