



**Submission proposed MDB Plan impacts**

Committee Secretary

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Regional Australia  
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AUSTRALIA

**Submission to the House Standing Committee on Regional Australia Re: Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia**

**From** Beth Williams, on behalf of Armidale Branch, National Parks Association of NSW, PO Box 372, Armidale, NSW 2350.

I write as a member of the Armidale Branch, National Parks Association of NSW, with a particular interest in the Gwydir and Namoi valleys because they contain core habitat for the endangered Regent Honeyeater for which I have undertaken voluntary conservation work for more than 20 years, and as a resident of the upper reaches of both valleys. I have also taken a close interest in the negotiations and implementation of the existing Cap on extractions in the Gwydir, and have attended past consultation meetings.

I am deeply disappointed that your terms of reference make no mention of environmental impacts, but refer only to the socio-economic impacts of the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Authority's 'Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan'. I ask the Committee to recognize that ecologically sustainable development (ESD) guidelines mandated under State and Federal laws require that consideration of socio-economic matters must include consideration of environmental matters.

Ross Gittens points out in *Reality check on what we take for granted*, SMH Weekend Business p 6, Dec 18-19, 2010, that current economic theory used in calculating GDP ignores the value of ecosystem services, and that this leads to flawed decisions on policy and practice. A system of integrated environmental and economic accounting is needed, as the UN commission and its member statistical agencies have agreed should become international standard by 2012.

I ask the Standing Committee on Regional Australia to include the value of ecosystem services in its consideration of the indirect impact of the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities etc.

The Committee should critically examine the narrow, economically based claims of \$ and jobs lost for each GL of water returned to the environment for each river valley community. These calculations invariably use simplistic estimates and multipliers to derive dollar values, are readily subject to exaggeration, and ignore ESD criteria. The grossly exaggerated figures for job and economic losses predicted by Forests NSW and its former Minister MacDonald in an effort to frustrate the NSW Government's decision to protect River Red Gums in some 100 000 ha of National Parks in the Riverina is a prime example of this misuse of statistics and computer modelling. The Natural Resources Commission Report on the River Red Gums showed the figures to be false.

It is dismaying that there are calls from the many vocal critics of the Guide to the Plan to reject its findings and start again. Emphatically that is not an option. Dying rivers cannot support the economy and will leave an irreversible damaged resource base for future generations - definitely not ecologically sustainable.

Certainly socio-economic and resource base impacts must be considered, whether or not they form part of the MDBA's brief under the Commonwealth Water Act 2007, but it is vital that the existing water buyback program continues and is not limited or reduced, and that the Australian Government maintains the independence of the MDB Authority and implements a scientifically robust MDB Plan. Adequate resources to support the delivery of the Plan and regional development opportunities, particularly food production, should be made available.

The identified sustainable diversion limits for each valley should be recalculated to take account of the current Federal investment in water buy back and infrastructure efficiencies. The actual reductions needed when the currently held environmental water purchased from willing sellers is included was unfortunately not presented by the MDBA, giving rise to much of the local community alarm and opposition to the Plan.

The Inland Rivers Network ([www.irnnsw.org.au](http://www.irnnsw.org.au)) has presented these re-calculated figures, giving a more realistic range for the actual SDL reductions that will be required in each river system to achieve Scenario 1 (3000GL/y) and Scenario 3 (4000 GL/y).

Examples are Border Rivers 13.25% - 16.87%; Gwydir 5.76% - 12.64%; Namoi 12.99 – 17.32%; Macquarie-Castlereagh 6.39 – 10.61%; Lachlan 0.16% - 3.88%. These figures are considerably less than the overall MDBA estimates of up to 33%, and may help defuse some of the individual valley opposition to the Plan.

Business as usual is not an option for a sustainable environment or a sustainable economy. Decades of over-extraction and over-use of water resources in the Basin have left the Basin ailing and highly degraded. Already we have lost 90% of our floodplain wetlands, 90% of our native fish populations, 80% of waterbird populations and 80% of River Red Gum wetland forest in the Basin. Current flood rains over the inland have given the rivers and wetlands a much-needed drink, but do not address the ongoing problem of over-allocation and likely effects of accelerating climate change on rainfall and runoff identified by the CSIRO.

Restoration of the natural capital of the MDB is essential to Australia's long-term prosperity. This natural capital is the wealth upon which the communities of the MDB are built. Community based groups such as the National Rural Health Alliance have recommended that governments work harder to find positive linkages between policies that can help rural, regional and remote communities to become economically, socially and environmentally sustainable by attracting and retaining the infrastructure, workforce and amenities that enable those who live there to lead healthy lives.

The restoration of a healthy Murray Darling Basin is a key opportunity to build these linkages. To help communities make a transition to sustainable economies and agricultural practices, the transition to sustainable rural economies can also be assisted by a range of job opportunities that arise from a strong response to climate change

The Basin Plan is the best and only opportunity we have to restore health to the rivers and the wetlands of the Murray-Darling Basin and maintain a sustainable basis for our food production. We need a Basin Plan that is scientifically robust, environmentally sound and will return water extraction in the Basin to sustainable levels. It is unthinkable that the whole process could be derailed by the hysterical protests and exaggerated claims of total economic ruin of communities from any cutbacks to existing extraction levels.

The Inquiry into the Impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia has a difficult task in trying to reconcile socio-economic and environmental impacts and devise a sustainable solution for the Murray Darling Basin. We wish you well in your endeavours, and trust that you will give due weight to environmental matters as well as economic ones.

Submission compiled by Beth Williams, on behalf of Armidale Branch, National Parks Association of NSW, PO Box 372, Armidale, NSW 2350. 20<sup>th</sup>  
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