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SUBMISSION TO

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

1. Impact of the proposed Basin Plan

The proposed Murray-Darling Basin plan with its blanket cuts to water allocations in almost all catchments is a monument to the ignorance of the MDB Authority. Its effects on agriculture, business and the regional communities would be negative and not in the nation's best interests. I attended the Dalby public meeting with the MDBA and was overwhelmed by the Authority's lack of technical and historical understanding of river behaviour and climate variation in South West Queensland, and even more so by the arrogance of these MDBA people in trying to push their loopy "environmental crusader" type anti-business/anti farming beliefs on the people living in the Murray Darling basin.

What really enrages MDB residents about the MDBA plan is the rapid moving of the goalposts to suit a trendy green political and social agenda. For over 100 years past Governments have strongly encouraged irrigation development along the MDB rivers, by building dams and barrages, and issuing irrigation licences; then, when there is a drought and the river dries up (and this has happened many times in the geological past) and the political going gets a bit tough, the same governments turn round and commission a bunch of persons with only a very short and superficial experience of the basin to report that almost all the rivers in the basin should have their licenced irrigation allocations cut by a flat 30 or 40% year in year out. If you were an irrigator who had invested your \$ according to the rules at a previous point in time you'd be incensed. Commercial enterprises and, more to the point, debts do not reset every three years like politics, you are stuck with the consequences of your business decisions for good.

Cuts of this magnitude were obviously going to have a major effect on the prosperity, social fabric and size of communities along the rivers.

1. OPTIONS FOR WATER SAVING OR RETURN

This term of reference pointedly assumes that water saving or return is actually necessary. While I believe hearsay suggests this may be so for some of the major irrigation areas in the southern half of the basin, for the Queensland rivers the necessity is not so clear, and for the Western Queensland rivers there is pretty much no point at all. I refer you to Attachment 1, which shows how a river system like the Warrego works in practice. Water savings or return are pointless in these situations, mother nature is doing the return of its own accord. (The paper shows how a major flood of 1,500,000 megs at Wyandra turns into a mere 150,000 megs at Fords Bridge, still well short of the Darling, let alone the Murray).

Another problem with the proposed 30/40% cut proposal is that if 2010 was to be the start of a 15 or even a 30 year wet period again, (paddle steamers back up the river to Burke) then the Government would have wasted a significant sum buying back irrigation licences, and a large slice of agricultural production would have been foregone and there would be no additional environmental benefits.

So I can't emphasise too much that the extreme climatic variability of the northern half at least of the MDB is the challenge for Europeans to understand: any planning needs to be based on 100 years of records at least. If the lower basins recent problems can be shown to be directly a result of excessive taking of water for irrigation, and are not a reflection of merely a relatively normal dry period in the catchment, then the MDBA's best option may be to involve a number of families who have lived on the rivers for at least 100 years, and have a history of using their land sensibly, to come up with some options for improving the health of the lower MDBA. The MDBA needs to be talking (and listening) to people like this, rather than academics and public servants who have no long term experience or relationship with these rivers.

Whatever action is decided on it should be understood that the regional communities that have grown up over the last 100 or more years cannot be just cut off at the knees, if allocation buyback is found to be desirable in the southern basin these buybacks will need to be spread over 30 to 50 years (two generations), so businesses and communities have time to adjust to the new playing field and possibly find alternative types of enterprise or relocate.

Hearsay suggests that extra water might be found from time to time for the lower river by separating the Menindee Lakes system from the river during smaller flood events.

The other aspect I might raise is that in Queensland I am told the money offered by the Buyback Authority is insufficient to prompt irrigators to consider selling back entitlements: if this is the case in the southern part of the basin, it may need to be addressed if future buyback goals are found to be desirable.

Yours faithfully

John Mills

ATTACHMENT 1

Extract from a Presentation by Mr Andrew Schmidt to Australian Rangelands Conference, Burke 2010

This paper follows the major Jan 2008 flood down the Warrego through the eyes of a local landholder whose family have lived on the river for more than 100 years.

The Warrego catchment consists of 130450 sq km of which 67500 sq km is in Qld and 64750 sq km is in NSW. About 45000sq km contributes most of the water to the system, all from Qld mostly above Wallen, which is situated 50km above Cunnamulla.

The paper explains how the distributory system of this river works, with the river fanning out into a huge delta like system below Wyandra, with most of the flow from this major 2008 flood event having left the "river" and gone into floodouts or other catchments (ending in further floodouts) before the Qld border is reached.

Flows were as follows:

Wyandra 1,500,000 megs

Wallen 1,388,000 megs

Cunnamulla 1,150,000 megs

Barringun 200,000 megs

Fords Bridge 150,000 megs

This flood was about as good as it gets, as there was good rain along the whole system and soakage losses were minimal. In summary, the environment has sucked the system dry.