



PO Box 3572,
Level 3, 553 Kiewa Street,
ALBURY NSW 2640

Phone (02) 6023 8791
Fax (02) 6023 8169

16th December 2010

The Secretary,
House Standing Committee on Regional Australia,
House of Representatives,
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Sir,

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

Introduction

The Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Councils (RAMROC) welcomes the opportunity to present this submission in response to Minister Simon Crean's announcement on 28th October 2010 of a Standing Committee Inquiry into the impact of the MDB Plan in Regional Australia, and to the Terms of Reference which have subsequently been released.

The MDBA Guide released on 8th October 2010 has clearly indicated that a draft MDB Plan as currently proposed will have far reaching and adverse implications for the future of irrigated food production, employment and the future sustainability of rural communities throughout the Basin. Understandably, there has been very significant concern expressed at the Community Information Sessions conducted by MDBA over the past several weeks.

In addition to the strong concerns and views expressed at those Community Information Sessions, Local Government Councils, Irrigation Corporations and private irrigation groups and individual irrigation farmers, rural industries and businesses and other key stakeholder organisations from across four States, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, have been united in their strong opposition to the dire economic, social and human impacts which a draft MDB Plan, with an almost entirely environmental focus, would mean for Australia's future.

This RAMROC submission will cover the following:-

1. RAMROC regional profile
2. RAMROC's Water4Food Program
3. The Commonwealth Water Act 2007 – Provisions relating to Economic, Social and Environmental Outcomes
4. Environmental Watering Requirements
5. Sustainable Diversion Limits
6. Social and Economic Considerations – including other studies, RAMROC's Strengthening Basin Communities Program and new MDBA socio-economic studies
7. Food and fibre production and security – National and Global Considerations
8. Potential for Alternative Water Solutions
9. Summary

RAMROC continues to communicate extensively with other Councils in New South Wales and Northern Victoria, Regional Development Australia Committees, Murray Darling Basin Authority, local community organisations, industry and businesses and key stakeholders generally.

The overriding objective which all communities and organisations are determined to achieve is an acceptable and sustainable triple bottom line environmental, economic and social outcome, which balances the critical components of healthy environments and river systems, maintaining irrigated food and fibre production capacities, and ensuring a viable and prosperous future for their rural communities

RAMROC and its Member Councils are keenly looking forward to the opportunity to meet with the House Standing Committee when it visits this region in late January 2011.

1. RAMROC Regional Profile

RAMROC represents the interests of eighteen member Councils in the Murray and Western Riverina region of south west New South Wales.

The region covers an area of 126,595 sq km and has a total population of 165,474 (March 2010 ABS Statistics). The southern part of the region extends along the Murray and Lower Murray-Darling Valleys, from Greater Hume Shire and Albury City at the eastern end through to the South Australian border in the west.

The northern and western part of our region extends generally within the Murrumbidgee and Lower Lachlan Valleys, westward from Narrandera Shire.

A map showing the RAMROC region in its context to the capital cities of Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide, together with the boundaries of the 18 Council areas, is set out in Appendix One.

The RAMROC region has a mix of large regional centres, medium sized irrigation based towns and urban shires, through to a number of predominantly dryland farming shire areas, large in size but with a low population base.

The major regional centres are Albury City (pop 50,522) and Griffith City (pop. 25,703). A large proportion of the region contains significant irrigation areas, the largest and best known ones being Murray Irrigation, Murrumbidgee Irrigation and Coleambally Irrigation. There are also an extensive number of smaller private irrigation schemes and individual farm irrigators,

The region is an important food and fibre source for Australian consumption and for export purposes. The region produces a wide range of summer and winter grain crops, fruit, vegetables, horticulture, viticulture, dairy and livestock

In 2005-2006, the Annual Gross Value of agricultural production was \$2.2 billion at the farm gate and up to \$9 billion value added. This represents 10% of the National and 25% of the NSW total agricultural production.

Agriculture directly employs 30,000 in the region, which is 37% of the total regional employment. Processing and transport employs an additional 17,000 people. Communities and businesses are therefore highly dependent on the agricultural sector – it is the key driver of most of the region's rural economies.

2. RAMROC's Water4Food Program



Whilst RAMROC's Water4Food program is not directly relevant to the Inquiry's specific Terms of Reference, the purpose of this part of the submission is to briefly illustrate the history of representations and actions which RAMROC has pursued with the Federal and State Governments over the past three years, in relation to the adverse impacts of Government policy on food and fibre production in the southern Murray Darling Basin, and in turn the real threats to the long term sustainability of irrigation communities.

The deep concerns of councils, regional food producers and communities in the region have been brought about by a combination of many years of extreme drought conditions, the projected impacts of climate change, the reduced water diversion limits now being foreshadowed in a new Murray Darling Basin Plan, and the Federal Government's Water for the Future Program's \$3.1 billion buyback program of irrigator water entitlements which are already well advanced.

In late 2008, RAMROC's concerns had reached the point whereby it was decided to convene two Leadership Summits, which brought together irrigation industry leaders and stakeholders, to discuss these critical issues. Arising from these Summits, it was decided to develop and undertake a **Water4Food** advocacy and marketing program, targeting Federal and State Governments, national and regional media, as well as citizens in capital cities and regional areas.

This program is ongoing and has been advocated to Federal and State Government Ministers, presented at a wide range of conferences, seminars and forums and also to stakeholder and community organisations, and within the national and regional media. The campaign has been extremely well supported and funded through local industry and business contributions, Chambers of Commerce, Community Service Clubs and individual residents.

The program has engaged the support and participation of Councils in northern Victoria and has also attracted significant attention throughout the northern part of the Murray Darling Basin.

The principal objectives of the **Water4Food** program are to achieve:-

- A sensible and pragmatic balance between environmental water needs, maintaining irrigated food production levels and ensuring the long term sustainability of rural towns and communities, i.e. a triple bottom line balance of environmental, economic and social considerations;
- Fair and equitable treatment of Murray, Murrumbidgee, Lower Murray-Darling and Lower Lachlan valleys in relation to the Federal and State Governments' water acquisition programs;
- Long term fixed and guaranteed security of water resources, in order to maintain irrigated food production capacities;
- Funding for upgrading of irrigation infrastructure, on-farm efficiency programs and industry re-structuring;

- Funding for structural adaptation of RAMROC communities impacted by reduced water availability;
- Increased scientific R&D initiatives to secure food production at current or greater levels, in an environment of reduced water availability.

The **Water4Food** program is of course now progressing alongside the current overriding issue of the proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan and what it proposes for the future of agriculture in the southern Murray Darling Basin and for our rural communities.

3. The Commonwealth Water Act 2007 – Interpretation of provisions relating to Economic, Social and Environmental Outcomes

The Guide to the draft MDB Plan has clearly been predicated on the basis of an interpretation of the Water Act that gives virtually total priority and emphasis to environmental watering requirements, with the issues of economic and social considerations very much secondary.

This has resulted in the calculation of proposed Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs), which are the quantities of water available for consumptive purposes (drinking water, industry, irrigated agriculture etc), being based on the amount of water available in the system, but only after all environmental needs have been satisfied.

MDBA's interpretation of the Water Act in formulating the Guide has meant that consideration of the outcomes of socio-economic studies undertaken to date have merely been a sub-set of the determination of the proposed SDLs. In other words, the socio economic studies are a product of the SDLs process, rather than a key contributor to the up-front calculation of SDLs.

The Commonwealth Water Minister the Hon Tony Burke MP has recently obtained legal advice from the Australian Solicitor General in this matter. As a result, the Minister has taken the position that the Water Act 2007, which was initially passed with bi-partisan support of both the Government and Coalition Opposition parties, does in fact enable full and equal consideration to be given to economic and social issues.

Minister Burke has indicated on a number of recent occasions that the Government and Coalition agree that the Water Act 2007 provisions allow for a triple bottom line approach. The Government is adamant that this interpretation falls within the current structure of the Act provisions and therefore the Act does not require any amendments.

However, following the early December 2010 resignation of the MDBA Chairman Mike Taylor, there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding the varying legal opinions and interpretations of the Water Act provisions.

So much so, that the Liberal and Nationals Coalition are now calling for the Water Act to be reviewed and appropriately amended, in order to remove these uncertainties and to ensure that in the longer term the Murray Darling Basin Plan is not vulnerable to legal challenges.

RAMROC is deeply concerned that unless this issue is fully resolved once and for all, MDBA will continue to finalise the Basin Plan in accordance with its interpretation of the Water Act provisions and the latest advice it has apparently received from the Australian Solicitor General, that being that MDBA *“cannot compromise the minimum level of water required to restore the system’s environment on social or economic grounds”*.

Under these circumstances, there would be a real danger that any Basin Plan developed along those lines will forever be “*an elephant in the room*”, regardless of what conflicting political decisions the current or any future Government might take in the matter.

RAMROC is strongly of the view that that the final MDB Plan must be prepared on the basis of equal weighting being given to environmental, economic and social considerations, with these considerations being determined individually for each of the Basin regions, because relevant factors will almost certainly vary from catchment to catchment.

MDBA is currently in the process of commissioning additional studies into the social and economic impacts. It is critically important that these studies comprehensively identify for each catchment the direct and indirect impacts of a range of potential Sustainable Diversion Limits on communities, industries, businesses, and most importantly including the human and health impacts.

However, having viewed the Project Brief for these latest socio-economic impact studies, in respect of which the successful contractors have not yet been formally announced by MDBA, and the project has not yet commenced, RAMROC is deeply concerned about the process and timetable, which requires a final report by the contractors to MDBA by 15th March 2011.

The outcomes of these new studies will no doubt be of significant importance to the findings of this Parliamentary Inquiry.

4. Environmental Watering Requirements

The Guide to the draft MDB Plan indicates the following details in relation to environmental watering requirements:-

- **Surface water** required to meet the environmental requirements at a basin wide scale have been estimated at between 22,100 GL/y and 26,700 GL/y (long term average);
- This represents an increase of between 3,000 GL/y to 7,600 GL/y (long term average) – over and above the 19,000 GL/y currently available for the environment;
- This additional environmental water is required to be met from the current diversion limits, by the determination of new Sustainable Diversion Limits;
- 2,442 environmental assets spread across the Basin have been identified – which includes 477 in the Murray region, 258 in the Murrumbidgee region, 73 in the Lower Darling region and 58 in the Lachlan region;
- 106 hydrological indicator sites have been identified – including 12 hydrological indicator sites to assess the water requirements for key ecosystem functions and 6 hydrological sites for key environmental assets;
- Proposed **surface water** reductions generally applicable to the RAMROC region in the 3,000 GL/y, 3,500 GL/y and 4,000 GL/y scenarios set out in the Guide are:-
 - * Murray (NSW) - (28% to 37% reduction of current watercourse diversions)
 - * Murrumbidgee (NSW) - (32% to 43% reduction of current watercourse diversions)
 - * Lower Darling –(29% to 38% reduction of current watercourse diversions)
- Proposed additional **groundwater** requirements for the environment are between 99 GL/y and 227 GL/y. Of this, 43.2 GL/y (40%) is proposed to come from the Lower Lachlan Alluvium

RAMROC comments on Environmental Watering Requirements as set out in the Guide

- Water entitlement reductions of the magnitude proposed would have devastating impacts on irrigated agricultural production in the southern Murray Darling Basin and in turn will impact severely on those communities that depend upon irrigation;
- The environmental watering requirements of up to 7,600 GL/y are supposedly based on “best available science”. However, over a relatively short space of time, we have observed that these “best available science” environmental watering requirements have increased exponentially, from 1500 GL (about the time of the Living Murray initiative), to 2,500 GL (NSW Natural Resources Commission River Redgums Report in early 2010), then to 4,400 GL (Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists Report– also in early 2010), and now leaping to 7,600 GL/y with recent indications by environmental groups that even this figure may not be the end target;
- It is understood that these quantities have been calculated in the absence of expert advice or hydrological modelling by the NSW Office of Water and/or NSW State Water, or in fact by other State Agencies throughout the Basin;
- No consideration appears to have been given to the various State Government Water Sharing Plans, which already are in place and which already provide a comprehensive framework and basis for consumptive water uses, for environmental watering, irrigated agricultural requirements, and which take account of economic and social issues;
- Minimal consideration appears to have been given to the potential for engineering solutions, which could increase the efficiency and effectiveness of delivering water to the identified environmental sites, particularly as alternatives to overbank flooding;
- Minimal provision has been made for major infrastructure and engineering works, which would achieve large scale environmental water savings, for example the planned re-configuration of Menindee Lakes, which has already been identified as having potential savings in evaporation of up to 400 GL/y;
- No consideration appears to have been given to the potential to significantly reduce the unacceptable levels of evaporation in the South Australian Lower Lakes, said to be in the order of 800 to 1,000 GL/y;
- A comprehensive Environmental Watering Plan, initially referred to by MDBA as the core basis for determining Sustainable Diversion Limits, has still not been produced.

Other Comments regarding environmental watering generally

- The recent “Millennium Drought” has been one of the most severe in recorded history, most likely due to the typical long term climate fluctuations of eastern Australia. It is highly probable that the ecological stresses apparent in the system over recent years were due more to the drought conditions, rather than water extraction for productive purposes;
- Anecdotal indications are that, following the substantial rainfall and flooding conditions in the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers over recent months, ecological indicators such as river redgums, waterbirds, frogs and native fish numbers have already substantially recovered, which lends support to the theory in the dot point above. If this is the case, the environmental impact of irrigation water extraction may be far less than has apparently been assessed.
- It may take further time to really determine whether the ecosystems have or are returning to a fully healthy state. However, it would seem to be a far better option to now wait and observe over a reasonable period of time of say 3 to 5 years, rather than implement strategies and actions that will have extremely adverse production and human impacts and which may be based on flawed and/or untested environmental assumptions;

- Following the recent high rainfalls and flooding of environmental sites, surely a thorough review of the environmental watering requirements assessed in the Guide can now be carried out in co-operation with State Agencies, taking full account of the quantum of actual river flows which occurred and the degree to which the identified environmental sites were watered;
- It should also be remembered that to a large extent, irrigation itself provides significant environmental benefits throughout the Basin's catchments – there appears to be no recognition given in the MDBA Guide to such benefits, nor does it take account of, or give credit to, environmentally conscious and best practice farming technologies and methods.

5. Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs)

In respect of catchments wholly or partly within the RAMROC region, the proposed Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) for the three optional scenarios of 3,000 GL/y, 3,500 GL/y or 4,000 GL/y additional environmental water take, are as follows:-

- Murray (NSW) – Surface Water

At 3,000 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 1,721 GL/y to 1,247 GL/y (28%)
At 3,500 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 1,721 GL/y to 1,165 GL/y (32%)
At 4,000 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 1,721 GL/y to 1,086 GL/y (37%)

- Murrumbidgee (NSW) – Surface Water

At 3,000 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 2,061 GL/y to 1,396 GL/y (32%)
At 3,500 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 2,061 GL/y to 1,281 GL/y (38%)
At 4,000 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 2,061 GL/y to 1,169 GL/y (43%)

- Lower Darling – Surface Water

At 3,000 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 55 GL/y to 39 GL/y (29%)
At 3,500 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 55 GL/y to 37 GL/y (33%)
At 4,000 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 55 GL/y to 34 GL/y (38%)

- Lachlan – Surface Water

At 3,000 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 302 GL/y to 258 GL/y (15%)
At 3,500 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 302 GL/y to 245 GL/y (19%)
At 4,000 GL/y - watercourse diversions reduced from 302 GL/y to 233 GL/y (23%)

- Lower Lachlan – Groundwater

The current diversion limit of 108 GL/y is proposed to be reduced to 64.8 GL/y (40%)
The current use is 117.9 GL/y – a proposed SDL of 64.8 GL/y represents a 45% reduction

RAMROC comments on Sustainable Diversion Limits

- The substantial reductions in watercourse diversions and groundwater extractions as proposed will have substantial impacts on irrigated food and fibre production, resulting in serious flow on impacts to communities, associated industries, local businesses and services generally;
- The proposed SDL's are predicated on the proposed additional environmental watering requirements, which have been referred to in Part 4 above of this submission;
- There is considerable doubt about the quality of the "best available science", on which the Environmental Watering Requirements and the SDLs have been based

- There is further scope to minimise the proposed environmental watering requirements, through infrastructure modernisation and other engineering efficiency initiatives at the identified environmental sites, and within the on-farm and off-farm irrigation schemes and systems;
- Other methods and opportunities for securing additional environmental water need to be fully explored, for example annual purchase or lease of temporary water available on the market;
- In the final determination of the Environmental Watering Requirements and SDLs, full account must be taken of all Commonwealth and State Government water savings projects dedicated to environmental flows which have already been completed, or are yet to be undertaken (including Water for Rivers, The Living Murray and other programs), as well as taking full account of all of the water entitlements buyback programs both past and proposed;
- Minimisation of environmental watering requirements through improved and reliable science, as well as innovation and engineering solutions and major infrastructure projects will obviously enable increases in the SDLs, and therefore need to be fully explored by MDBA – otherwise it simply cannot be acknowledged as a comprehensive Murray Darling Basin Plan.

6. Social and Economic Considerations

- In preparing the final draft Murray Darling Basin Plan, MDBA needs to again consider the legal advice of the Australian Solicitor General to the Commonwealth Water Minister Tony Burke MP; and to make strong efforts towards achieving a triple bottom line balanced outcome between environmental, economic and social considerations.
- Minister Burke's clearly stated objectives are to achieve outcomes that provide for Healthy Rivers, Food Production and Sustainable Communities;
- Therefore, the current differing interpretations of the current Water Act provisions are key issues that must be resolved before the draft MDB Plan and the determination of SDLs are able to proceed with credibility and confidence of an acceptable outcome;
- It is a logical assessment that any substantial loss of irrigation water from the Murray Darling Basin system will have significant social, economic and psychological/mental health impacts on farmers, families, communities, towns and businesses;
- Currently, there are huge discrepancies between the ABARE projected socio-economic impacts as set out in the Guide of only 800 job losses and only a \$800,000 reduction in gross irrigated agricultural activity (based on 3,000 GL/y additional environmental water), in comparison to other socio-economic studies undertaken which have clearly demonstrated significantly greater adverse impacts;
- One such comprehensive study of relevance includes the work carried out by Judith Stubbs and Associates, which was actually presented to the MDBA Board, but apparently not considered to be of use or substantial relevance. The Stubbs' Study demonstrated very substantial impacts in respect of two LGA case studies in or close to the RAMROC region, namely Griffith City and Mildura City;
- In broad summary, the Stubbs study projects substantial impacts on employment and population in both cities, based on the potential 10%, 25% and 50% cuts in productive water availability. For example, using a potential 25% cut (somewhat less than the

proposed 32-43% reductions as set out in the Guide), employment in Griffith is estimated to drop by 9.5% and population by 12.7%. In Mildura, also based on a 25 % projected cut, employment is estimated to drop by 7.3% and population by 8.5%;

- Local Government Councils from throughout the Basin are undertaking extensive community profiling and studying impacts of reduced water availability, under the Commonwealth Government's Strengthening Basin Communities Program. The MDBA socio-economic study consultants now being appointed need to liaise closely with Councils in this regard;
- The RAMROC Strengthening Basin Communities Program (\$3 million from the Commonwealth) is very much focussed on opportunities available to RAMROC councils and communities, in the face of climate change and reduced water availability, particularly in relation to the economic growth, diversification and sustainability of communities throughout the region;
- The SBC programs in the RAMROC region (4 separate regional cluster groups under an overarching framework) are being undertaken in three stages over a two year period and are due for completion by late 2011 – the three stages being;
 1. Where are we now ?
 2. What may the future hold ?
 3. How do we provide sufficient water for viable industries and communities ?
- Chapter 7 of the MDBA Guide appears to be very general and simply concludes *“that the Authority has judged that only with reductions in current diversion limits of 3,000 to 4,000 GL can it optimise social, economic and environmental outcomes, as it is required to do so under the Water Act. The Authority is concerned that reductions in diversion limits of greater than 4,000 GL would have implications for the social and economic fabric of the basin severe enough to prevent the Authority from complying with the Water Act”*;
- However, Appendix C to the Guide's Irrigation District Community Profiles for the Murrumbidgee Region (pages 899 to 937) and the Central Murray Region (pages 964 to 999), prepared by Marsden Jacob Associates clearly spells out the key issues for each of those regions and concludes inter-alia for each region that *“water reductions of greater than 20% will result in many farm businesses becoming unviable, with direct flow-on impacts occurring at the community level”*;
- It is concerning that MDBA appears to very much discount the thrust of the Marsden Jacob work. It concludes *“It is important to note that this analysis of the potential social and economic impacts of reductions in current diversion limits starts with the assumption that no transitional support or assistance will be provided by government and, as such, represents an extreme scenario of what could occur. The Australian Government has clearly indicated that this will not be the approach”*. This is seen as an attempt to gloss over the real outcomes of the report, particularly in the absence of any definitive assistance measures that could minimise the impacts.
- The new MDBA Study into the Assessment of Local Community Impacts must be undertaken having regard to the ASG legal advice. The Study must be comprehensive and thorough, examining in detail the potential impacts in each of the 19 MDBA regions, based on extensive community consultation and the development of practical case studies.
- This project should also have due regard to the outcomes of other socio-economic studies already undertaken throughout the Basin. Based on the MDBA summation of

the Marsden Jacob report, it must identify what measures the Australian Government proposes to mitigate the impacts, as well as quantifying the projected mitigation outcomes that such assistance measures would in practice achieve within an identified timeframe;

- The Project Brief for the new MDBA Study is of considerable concern, in that it appears likely to commence in December 2010; is required to deliver initial findings and a Discussion Paper within 8 weeks (i.e. by the end of January 2011); then prepare a detailed draft report on the project (time not specified); and then a detailed Final Report by 15th March 2011;
- The final report is also to incorporate feedback from MDBA on the draft report and for the consultants to participate in “up to” three public workshops, to present the results of the project;
- This appears to be a rushed timetable and process, which gives RAMROC little confidence that the report will be sufficiently thorough and comprehensive, or that it will provide adequate opportunity for community and stakeholder input.
- In the new socio-economic study Project Brief, there appears to be no indication that MDBA intends to take account of the advice given to the Australian Solicitor General to Water Minister Burke, whereby the economic and social considerations are to be given the highest level of importance and weighting, in the same manner which has already been given to the environmental watering requirements and SDL determinations;
- During 2010, the Central Murray and parts of the Murrumbidgee region have already been hard hit both economically and socially by the declaration of substantial areas of redgum forests as National Parks by the NSW Government;
- The NSW declaration has effectively destroyed a 150 year sustainable and well managed redgum timber industry worth \$80 million to \$100 million annually, and replaced that loss of industries and hundreds of direct and indirect jobs with a once only \$12 million assistance package;
- As a result, investment and individual confidence is at a very low ebb in the affected towns and communities, causing great uncertainty for the future, considerable depreciation in property values, loss of employment opportunities and generally an undesirable level of human distress;
- Further adverse economic and social impacts, which would be incurred under the MDBA’s Basin Plan Guide proposals, could well be “the straw that finally breaks the camel’s back” for many people and communities in the region – and as with the redgum situation, any such decisions are environmentally unnecessary and generally ill advised.

7. Food and fibre production and security – National and Global considerations

- In preparation of the draft Murray Darling Basin Plan, the importance of food and fibre production and security, in both a national and global context, must be given consideration at the highest level;
- In 2005-2006, the gross value of irrigated agricultural production in the MDB was approximately \$5.5 billion, representing around 45% of Australia’s irrigated agricultural production and 14% of overall Australian agricultural production;

- The total size of the MDB economy – in terms of gross regional product (GRP) – was around \$59 billion in 2000-2001, representing around 8% of Australian gross domestic product (GDP);
- In 2006, the MDB accounted for approximately 10% of total national employment, employing around 920,000 people. Of these, 96,000 people were employed directly in agriculture and in agriculture related services;
- The worldwide human population is growing fast – from 6.5 billion in 2010 to an estimated 9.1 billion by 2050. Almost 1 billion people go hungry every day;
- Demand for protein food, especially in China and India, is rising even faster. Food wastage worldwide is also a significant issue and total food demand could therefore rise 110% by 2050, which in turn will represent a need to feed the equivalent of some 13 billion people;
- Sustaining the world's food supply is perhaps the greatest challenge of our time – arguably considered by many people as more urgent than climate change;
- The long term security and sustainability of Australian food production is absolutely critical to our national interests – both in terms of our economy and in protecting against the potential for future world instability;
- Therefore, just as Australia has global responsibilities for the environment, it has international humanity obligations as well – hence the critical importance of maintaining food production capacities in the Murray Darling Basin;
- Food production and food security must be very important components of a final Murray Darling Basin Plan. Bearing in mind that all food eaten by the world's population needs water to produce and that there is no substitute for water in the food production process, it is somewhat disturbing that there appears to have been an uncoupling and disengagement of food production issues by MDBA when formulating the Guide;
- Understanding further that all water used for food production comes from rain, it must be questioned why an irrigation producer who uses water to grow food (which has generally been sensibly captured and stored in large river system dams) is often accused of wasting valuable water resources, whereas without any criticism at all we observe so much water being allowed to simply run out to sea, or being used in a variety of non productive and sometimes wasteful ways;
- Australia, probably for the first time ever, has a Commonwealth Government Minister with a wide ranging and inter-related portfolio, which embraces sustainability, environment, water, population and communities. Surely this presents an opportunity to develop a set of long term comprehensive National Plans which can integrate all of these important elements, i.e a National Sustainable Population and Communities Plan, a National Water Plan, a National Environmental Plan, and a National Food Production and Security Plan;

9. Potential for Alternative Water Solutions

- Insufficient consideration has so far been given to the issue of alternative water solutions for the Murray Darling Basin's water resources and management. The draft

Plan must not simply look at the problems that exist, it must also investigate potential long term solutions;

- RAMROC does not have the resources or technical expertise to recommend specific solutions, but proposes that MDBA should in preparing the draft Plan investigate all potential options for the generation of new water sources for the Basin, as well as ways to better manage the existing resources, including inter alia the following;
 - Harvesting and re-directing surplus water resources from northern Australia and the eastern seaboard in Queensland and New South Wales;
 - Increased innovation and development of cloud seeding technology;
 - New and innovative irrigation technologies and infrastructure, both on and off farm;
 - New infrastructure projects, including additional and /or expanded water storages, for example a new storage at Wellington in South Australia, or expansion of storages such as Lake Buffalo and Lake William Hovell in north east Victoria;
 - Engineering solutions to reduce major evaporation losses, e.g. Menindee Lakes, Lower Lakes;
 - Engineering solutions to more effectively and efficiently deliver water to the MDB environmental assets,
 - Continuous development of water efficiency and water saving programs at both rural and urban levels
 - Ways to generate additional water supplies to capital cities and reduce reliance on the existing Murray River resources, e.g. de-salination plants and associated pipeline systems, new or expanded storages in capital city catchments;

The MDB draft Plan cannot be recognised as a complete and acceptable plan, unless it identifies and investigates all potential options capable of resolving the water shortfall issues.

As mentioned in Part 8 above, Federal and State Governments through COAG should be developing a visionary long term National Water Plan – effectively and efficiently harnessing, controlling and managing the nation’s water resources for the benefit of all Australians.

Summary

RAMROC is appreciative of this opportunity of making a submission to the Standing Committee.

Our principal concerns are briefly summarised as follows:-

- The differing interpretations of the Commonwealth Water Act have potential to cause conflicting philosophies between MDBA and the Government. This will inevitably lead to long term confusion and therefore this issue must be resolved before preparation of the draft plan proceeds any further;

- The Environmental Watering Requirements seem to be based on doubtful science and unsatisfactory methodology, with insufficient attention given to potential ways in which the requirements may be able to be minimised;
- The recommended Sustainable Diversion Limits are a product of the Environmental Watering Requirements, and may well be based on flawed science and untested assumptions;
- The economic and social impacts of the EWR and SDL proposals will be very significant. The MDBA proposals will adversely impact on food production capacity in the southern Murray Darling Basin foodbowl region and in turn have the potential to decimate rural towns and communities – considerably more detailed socio-economic impact studies need to be urgently undertaken to achieve a sensible and pragmatic triple bottom line balance;
- RAMROC Councils are currently undertaking extensive studies under the Commonwealth Government's Strengthening Basin Communities Program, to assess likely impacts of climate change and the MDB Plan, and to plan for adaptation to a future of reduced water availability and to investigate potential water saving initiatives – but this can only be a part of an overall package of measures to mitigate the impacts;
- Food production and food security issues are of paramount importance, both nationally and globally, and must be key considerations in the development of the MDB Plan;
- Australian Governments need to develop “big picture” long term and integrated Plans for Population, Communities, Environment, Water and Food;
- Currently the draft Plan Guide has given no consideration to alternative water solutions, so as to better harness, control and manage the nation's water resources – this is a critical aspect that needs to be addressed as part of a final MDB Plan;

The RAMROC Executive looks forward to an opportunity to meet with the Standing Committee early in 2011, in order to more comprehensively discuss these matters.

Cr Terry Hogan AM
CHAIRMAN

Ray Stubbs
EXECUTIVE OFFICER

See separate attachment - Appendix 1 – Map of RAMROC region and Member Council areas



RAMROC Councils, NSW

Total Area 126,595 sq km - Total Population 165,474

