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South Australian Murray Irrigators (SAMI)

Submission to

**Standing Committee on Regional Australia
Department of the House of Representatives**

**Inquiry into certain matters relating to the
proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan**

South Australian Murray Irrigators would like to submit the following submission to the standing committee.

Progress to date in water recovery towards bridging the gap by 2019 through both irrigation infrastructure investments and water purchase

SAMI cannot truly comment on water recovery progress due to the ambiguity and lack of easily accessible and factual information that you can trust. Our most reliable source of information is through verbal discussions had around our committee board and that of the South Australian River Communities group which has links with community, council and state government organizations. This is generally verbal and rarely backed up with documented evidence.

SAMI and others have pursued all relevant departmental organizations across all jurisdictions to gain this information. This has been an initiation of our community bodies to gain the facts. Without this drive and insistence, our businesses and communities would be less informed than we currently are.

Figures heard are assumed to have a significant error of assumption attached to them, particularly when such large fluctuations in reporting ensue. But what is confusing to communities is, "Where does the Living Murray recovered waters come into this? How does the intentions of the Living Murray compare to the results of the waters recovered for environmental purposes to date.

SAMI does support the concept of a Basin Plan but cannot abide the blatant inequalities that the irrigator is experiencing as the 'go to' cash-cow for the state and nation's bad water and land management problems. The Purchase the Gap commitment needs to be extended across to a state level and stop hoodwinking entitlement holders as to the true extent of the over allocation problem. This is relevant to the Environmental Works and Measures program because as the legislation currently sits, all waters that are 'created' in the name of these works and measures will, by default, be given a higher priority allocation rating and consequently further reduce the volumes of water able to be utilized by irrigators (share value annually). This creates a cost imposition on all irrigation businesses who then have to purchase more water to maintain their business strategy. This is particularly impacting on permanent crops that have large production lead in times. On the same token you cannot rule out annual crops as being equally affected due to the capital investment that is required to grow and process any crop. Invested infrastructure cannot remain idle in any business before it starts to impact on the bottom line.

We as irrigators would like to have faith in our departments to manage the river in a sustainable manner that respects the residents for whom they manage. The current manipulation of irrigators water rights, justified under the guise of

drought and global warming has struck a knife to the heart of regional communities. This is relevant to the terms of reference of this inquiry because for the South Australian Murray Irrigator (whose industries support an overwhelming majority of river dependent regional communities) because it would directly affect our businesses. Our water rights now hold the lowest security rating in the entire Basin. State, COAG and Federal laws policies and agreements have combined to allow all other state and federal water products to now take precedence over our once held security of delivered allocations.

The potential role that new environmental works and measures projects could play in partially offsetting SDL reductions under the Basin Plan, focusing particularly on prospective project proposals identified by state governments and community interests.

Environmental Works and Measures can be interpreted so many ways and that fact alone reduces the confidence in this work to achieve real water savings. How will it be implemented alongside real and endorsed water entitlements that have obligations to be filled?

Through the community workshops that have been advertised recently calling for community ideas on that score, it is obvious that this is still in a developmental phase. That can be forgiven as the reality of the situation. What cannot be forgiven is the constant deferral and manipulation that our irrigation businesses are undergoing while it is worked out. This attitude would sound selfish were it not for the fact that we have all endured a 10 year drought, combined with 25 years of water reform, combining with large and evidently wasteful budgets to enable this good work to have already been done!

The real and unwavering issue for SAMI with 'Environmental Works and Measures, is how will they affect allocated water volumes needed to run their business? Will the water savings be committed to license and if so how will it affect the irrigator's ability to access their allocation? (ie 67% in a flood year). The verbal assurances are continually that irrigators won't be affected, but that is not what the legislation and policies say. History has taught us to go by what you read, not by what departmental staff, tell you.

The extensive consultation we hear about is selective and steered towards a pre-ordained outcome and tends to wash over or simply ignore the facts of the situation. SAMI dubiously accepts that those in the environmental field know what they are doing when it comes to environmental proposals. We note however that little is proposed for the Morgan – Lakes section of the river.

One of the biggest environmental works and measures that is being over-looked is the good will of irrigators to strive to not use all of their allocations and allow

that water to flow past their property. This was historically known as 'sleeper water' and would vary in proportion of entitlement from irrigator to irrigator and crop to crop. In reality this surplus does not flow down the river but is available to others at the state's discretion for further use. The non-use of entitled allocations could directly benefit the environment down-stream from them. This was used to manage seasonal risk and was seen as prudent management for many farms. This concept of 'letting the change flow' would go a long way to providing integrity in the water licensing system, allow farmers to manage their own risk in a known environment and allow seasonal waters to benefit all downstream water users through increased water quality and flow volumes. The further use of this 'sleeper water' puts strain on the security of irrigators entitled right to secured allocations while removing these waters from the environment and those who owned the rights to its use.

In the past we have been willing participants of reform. Enthusiastic to better our practices and improve our surroundings. We will continue to do so because we all love our homes. But needing condescending and often wrong policy assumptions being forced down our throats and having the burdens of all of the nations past environmental wrongs lumped on our doorstep is ruinous and divisive. Salt in the MDB is directly attributed to colonial land clearance on a vast scale and also the construction of locks in the 1930s that restricted system drainage and raised localized salty groundwater. Irrigation impacts on Salt in the basin are minimal and have largely been addressed through the past two decades of changing management practices. The scientists' reliance on models is not allowing them to see the forest for the trees. This erodes the public's confidence in public managers to manage competently.

The groundwater sustainable diversion limits (SDLs) for Basin in the revised proposed Basin Plan

No Comment, as long as it doesn't affect irrigators' reliability and security in investment to known and highly secured allocations.

South Australian Murray Irrigators would like to thank the House Standing Committee on Regional Australia for providing us with this opportunity to comment on certain matters relating to the proposed Murray-Darling Basin plan. Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely
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South Australian Murray Irrigators

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