



Minority report – The Hon Sharman Stone MP and Mr Michael McCormack MP

On the 29th of June 2012 the Murray Darling Basin Ministerial Council asked the MD Basin Authority to respond to the calls by South Australian Premier Jay Weatherill to “complete a relaxed –constraints model scenario with a Basin-wide reduction in diversions of 3200GL/y. The purpose of this scenario (was) to explore the flow regime changes and potential in environmental benefits that would result if some major existing river operating constraints in the southern connected system were relaxed” (*MDBA Hydrologic modelling of the relaxation of operational constraints in the southern connected system, Methods and Results, October 2012. P.1.*)

This Bill, the consequence of this modelling as requested by the South Australian Premier, provides the funding of some \$1.7bill for the acquiring of an additional 450GL of water to add to the 2750 GLs of environmental water identified as still needed in the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

This Bill has been so poorly drafted that the Federal Department was required to give the committee an interpretation of the intended meaning of some key sections. For example, while the Explanatory Memorandum implies that water should only be found from on farm water use efficiency savings, this is not made clear. Our concern extends, however, well beyond the proposed sources of the additional 450GLs of water to be pushed down the southern connected system.

We are deeply concerned about the flooding impacts on the environment the regional economies and the communities if the natural barriers and constraints in the system are removed. For example, from the data available, it would seem that widespread flooding of the Lower Goulburn Flood Plain, and the Murray below Yarrawonga, would occur on a regular basis (ie every 2.5years). On the Goulburn floodplain this would be a 40,000ML/D flood for a median duration of four days

between June and November for 40% of the years, i.e every two and a half years. This would, quite simply, devastate a highly productive region and inundate infrastructure, including the flooding of some 100 houses in Shepparton. The flatness of the topography would see water accessing aquifers, retriggering salinization problems.

The Bill claims that pushing this extra volume of water down the systems will improve the condition, in particular of assets at the mouth of the Murray and the Lower Lakes in South Australia. In fact, due to the barrages and other engineering works in place for over 70 years in these parts, it was observed that despite some of the biggest volumes of water on record recently surging past Lake Albert and the southern Coorong, neither of these assets benefited from the record flood flow due to these barrages. Unfortunately this Bill does not address these engineered impediments to achieving a natural flushing of the mouth of the Murray or the salinity levels of the lower lakes.

As the October 2012 MDBA report entitled: The Hydrological Modelling of the Relaxation of operational constraints in the southern connected system states:

“the removal of some of these constraints may lead to increased flow peaks further downstream, which may create nuisance flooding on privately held land. If this were to be pursued in reality (rather than in modelled scenarios), it is likely that governments would approach this by negotiation of easements. Assessing the downstream implications of managing higher flow rates from a flooding perspective will require detailed hydrological modelling of the river system and was not within the scope of this work. P8.”

Despite this absence of “detailed hydrological modelling”, Basin communities are expected to accept the assurances that the additional 450GLs of environmental flow can be achieved without social or economic detriment although again this pre-condition is not clearly stated in the Bill.

It is quite unrealistic to expect the appropriation of the extra funds identified in the Bill would be sufficient to cover the “range of projects” which we are told would be required to remove “constraints” to enable the extra 450GLs to be pushed out to sea. These “projects” we are told could include the acquisition of flood easements, provision of access works (for example bridges and culverts) changed watering regimes and increased outlet capacity on major dams and storages.

Unfortunately, the Murray Darling Basin Plan does not include environmental watering plans. This Bill is to fund the acquiring of huge additional volumes of water, equal to nearly half of the remaining irrigator entitlement in the Goulburn Murray Irrigation System, without these watering plans, without any reasonable expectation of additional environmental benefit, but potentially additional environmental degradation in the areas to be artificially flooded, without detailed hydrological modelling, or delivery risk assessments.

We believe it is disingenuous of the Government to change the order of speaking business in Parliament on 27 November such that the Water Amendment (Water for the Environment Special Account) Bill 2012 was debated.

This ensured Members who spoke on this important piece of legislation did not have the benefit of the final recommendations of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia or this minority report.

We cannot support this Bill.

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Member for Murray

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