

Dissenting Report

Australian Greens

1.1 In the course of this inquiry, many experts made submissions affirming what is required to preserve the Murray Darling Basin (MDB). The Chair's report for this Senate inquiry conducted by the Select Committee on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan fails to accurately reflect the views expressed by these experts. The Chair's report lists 31 recommendations, many of which will be detrimental to the long term health and sustainability of the MDB. Without a healthy river system, the environmental, economic and social impacts for rural communities will be catastrophic.

1.2 It is also questionable whether this inquiry was necessary given the extensive community consultation undertaken over the last decade to legislate the *Water Act 2007*, develop the Murray Darling Basin Plan (MDBP) and for the review of the *Water Act* last year. In 2007 the *Water Act* was enacted and the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) was established. As outlined in the MDBA's submission to this inquiry, the MDBP was developed to ensure a sustainable basin that delivers social, economic and environmental outcomes.

1.3 The formation of the MDBP included undertaking an incredibly comprehensive community consultation process resulting in almost 12 000 submissions. The final MDBP was endorsed in November 2012 and was agreed to by all MDB states and the Commonwealth government, a truly momentous achievement that provided a framework to ensure the long term health of this iconic Australian river system.

1.4 Furthermore, an independent review of the *Water Act* was recently undertaken and concluded that significant progress has been made to implement the MDBP.

Major concerns

1.5 The Australian Greens have serious concerns about many of the recommendations made in the Chair's report and the likely negative impacts they could have on the long term health and sustainability of the MDB. This would have knock on effects for the environmental, social and economic elements of the MDB.

1.6 One example is Recommendation 13 which calls on the government to investigate changing the Coorong's Ramsar listing from a freshwater system, to an estuarine system. The Coorong has been listed by the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance as a freshwater system for over 30 years. The MDBA's submission states that the historical evidence demonstrates that the lakes were predominantly fresh. Pushing for this change of status blatantly disregards the value of the Lower Lakes and Coorong ecosystems and ignores the negative impacts this change would have on local fishing and tourism industries.

1.7 Another example is Recommendation 14, which calls for a cost-benefit analysis of removing or adapting the barrages. This is not in the best interests of the health of the MDB, particularly the Lower Lakes and Coorong. Many submissions

including from the SA government, MDBA and Alexandrina Council highlight these concerns.

1.8 Recommendation 15 provides a third example which calls for an 'independent feasibility and hydrologic study of a connector between Lake Albert and Coorong'. A scoping study on this issue was completed by the SA government in 2014 and found that even without considering the potential negative ecological impacts on the Coorong, the connector failed on cost-benefit grounds. This study also outlined that the traditional owners of the land, the Ngarrindjeri people 'do not support any engineering intervention'.¹

1.9 Recommendation 19 is particularly concerning, and would have detrimental impacts to the river system basin-wide. This recommendation calls on the government to have the Productivity Commission undertake a cost-benefit analysis of the MDBP. The MDBP was only finalised in November 2012 with many outcomes of the MDBP still in the process of implementation. Conducting such a review would be costly, time consuming and would stymie the substantial progress that has been achieved with the MDBP over the last 3 years.

1.10 Another example is Recommendation 20 that grossly misrepresents the 650GL value by labelling it as a target. This is not a target that forms part of the current MDBP. It is critical that the sustainable diversion limits adjustment mechanism is conducted on the basis of robust, independent science and is subject to third party review. The focus must instead be on achieving agreement between all states by June 2016 on the additional 450GL committed to by the Commonwealth government. Without the additional 450GL the health of the Lower Lakes and Coorong will be under risk of severe degradation.

Provisional support for some recommendations

1.11 Although The Australian Greens have serious concerns with regards to the majority of the recommendations, the party provisionally supports the following:

- Recommendation 9 in relation to the initiation of a judicial inquiry into the operation of the Goulburn Murray Water Connections Project. This inquiry should include a cost-benefit analysis of recovering water through irrigation projects compared to water buybacks.
- Recommendation 27 in relation to providing the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder with greater capacity to conduct monitoring, objective evaluation and communication of environmental watering activities.
- Recommendations 28 and 29 in relation to implementing measures that support recovery efforts of native fish.

1 Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (2014), *Lake Albert Scoping Study Options Paper*, Government of South Australia, p. 69.

Closing remarks

1.12 Many submissions to this inquiry concluded that the full and timely implementation of the MDBP is critical to securing a healthy long-term future for the MDB. The Australian Greens agree with this assessment and will fight to ensure the 3200GL water target committed to by the Commonwealth government is achieved in a timely fashion. The Australian Greens will not support any changes to the *Water Act* or MDBP that reduce this target or compromise the long term health and sustainability of the MDB.

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