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SUBMISSION TO: House of Representatives Regional Australia Committee

FROM: Virginia Tropeano
on behalf of Ernie and Virginia Tropeano,

Re: **INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF THE MDBA'S GUIDE TO THE
PROPOSED MURRAY DARLING BASIN PLAN**

Our Family Background

My husband and I are immigrants who love Australia and the Australian way of life, particularly the traditional ethic of "a fair go for everyone". My husband and his family came to Griffith from Italy in 1956 and I came to Griffith from England with my family in 1963. We were married in 1969 and started out with nothing but our dreams. We have worked hard all our lives to give our children and grandchildren a solid background in this outstanding farming community of Griffith.

We are winegrape growers with vineyards at Hanwood, 10 kms from Griffith in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area. We also have a contract grape harvesting and cartage business, which operates during vintage and is totally dependent on the winegrape industry in this area.

We are fortunate to have four adult children who also live close by with their young families. Our elder son, son-in-law and daughter all work in the family business. We also employ two fulltime workers and many casual workers at various times of year, particularly during vintage.

Our younger son is employed by a Griffith business which sells farming supplies and is thus totally dependent on agriculture, and his wife is a hairdresser in Griffith. Our elder daughter works for a New Zealand based poultry company which grows baby chickens for export all over the world. This company has hatcheries in Coleambally and Griffith and is only located here because we have water. Her husband is a crane operator with much of his work involved in the construction industry. The construction industry is of course dependent on the continued growth of this area, which is again dependent on agriculture and water.

The Human Cost of the Proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan

Counting my elderly parents who have their home on our farm, there are 22 people in our immediate family plus another 11 people in the families of our two fulltime workers, who would need to relocate if this area is allowed to die, which without doubt would be the end result of the MDBA's unrealistic proposals.

The true human cost of the proposed SDLs needs to be considered. The MDBA should not just be relying on consultant's reports. My experience of consultant's reports is that they are often based on ridiculous surveys and so called "research". In my daughter's marketing degree one of the things she learnt regarding surveys and market research was that you can virtually come up with any result you want simply by the way you phrase the questions and the people you target.

My personal experience of the numerous phone calls I receive from people conducting surveys and market research is that the person on the other end of the phone usually has absolutely no idea of the subject matter. If your answers to their questions don't fit their set criteria, they don't know where to put them and half the time they don't even speak English well enough to be conducting the research interview.

Some time ago, I had a phone call from a young man who was conducting a survey which supposedly allowed people living in the Basin to have input into the Murray Darling Basin Plan. I told him we were farmers and that we grow winegrapes, but when I said we also do contract grape harvesting and cartage, the young man said "Oh, well we've filled our quota for trucking businesses, so I don't need to ask you any more questions!" He took no notice of my insistence that we were mainly engaged in farming winegrapes, that the other business was only operated during vintage and we could not be classified as a trucking business. As I particularly wanted to have input I was not happy that he would not allow me to be involved. At the time I contacted the MDBA through their website to complain, but I never received any acknowledgement or reply.

I believe it is imperative that the MDBA takes notice of all the submissions they receive and does not just pay lip service to them. I sincerely hope the submissions will not just be counted and handed out to a consultant for a brief report. It is also imperative that they actually start to listen to the people who are going to be affected. This means talking to people one on one and actually hearing what they are saying!

Water for the Environment

The Authority's proposals appear to have only focused on taking water away from the farmers and giving it to the environment. To my knowledge full details have not yet been released of the 2,442 key environmental assets identified and it doesn't appear that any plan has been put in place as to exactly how it is intended to deliver this water to the environment. I doubt if consideration has been given to where weirs and other infrastructure will need to be built in order to lift the level of the river and enable environmental flows to some of these key environmental assets. I note that Murrumbidgee Irrigation has made suggestions on how to get water to some of these key environmental assets without wasting a lot of water, but these have been ignored.

Many of these areas can only be flooded if river levels are similar to what we have at the moment and that is in a time of flood. However, realistically there are no floods in times of drought and it is ridiculous in the extreme to even consider creating a mini flood during a drought so that water can be delivered to the environment! It would not have happened naturally so it should not happen artificially.

Page xv of the Executive summary in the Guide states “The combination of drought and historic diversions means that there have been no significant flows through the Murray Mouth since 2002”. What doesn’t appear to be understood by the Authority is that after two years of drought (ie in 2002) if the river was still in its natural state prior to the building of the dams for irrigation, there would still have been no flows at all through the Murray Mouth.

During droughts some sections of the Murray often dried up completely between isolated pools of deeper water and the river ceased to flow at all. The paddleboats would have to stay where they were until it rained again. As the Lower Lakes were an estuary ecosystem, they operated as nature intended they should and sea water kept the lakes from drying up and exposing acid sulfate soils. Salt water would then flow inland up the Murray as far as Mannum. None of this caused permanent harm to the environment which always recovered when the drought was broken.

Historically in the Murray Darling Basin we have always had droughts followed by floods. We have just had a devastating 10 year drought and yet statistics from these 10 years have been used as the foundation for many of the MDBA’s reports and proposals. How can you determine river health during a drought? If it were not for the dams and irrigation the river would have been dry after just a couple of years of this drought.

When identifying its key environmental sites, the Authority has picked some sites which would not even exist if it were not for irrigation. They appear to have relied very heavily on Ramsar listings even though this reliance is flawed. For example the Lower Lakes have a Ramsar listing as a freshwater ecosystem, when they were actually an estuary for 6,000 years prior to the erection of the barrages in the 1930s.

The SDLs outlined in the Guide indicate the Murrumbidgee Valley is facing cuts of up to 890 GLs. Just the evaporation of water from the Lower Lakes alone (940 GLs) would go a long way to providing the environmental water sought. They are relatively shallow lakes which cover an immense surface area and require 4,000-6,000 GLs of environmental flow each year. Many insightful suggestions have been made on how the Lakes could be returned to their natural estuarine state and yet still provide water for those communities and irrigators dependent upon them for freshwater.

Drought proofing the Basin

Instead of taking water away from farming communities and consequently depopulating Australia’s most productive inland region, would it not make more sense to look at drought proofing the Murray Darling Basin? The billions of dollars already spent in buying back water would have been better spent in investigating and building infrastructure to provide more water for the basin. It could then be expanded and developed further to provide food for this country as we head towards a world food supply shortage in the years to come. It just does not make sense to do what they are proposing. The pioneers of the Murray Darling Basin would turn in their graves if they knew this so called “solution” was even being considered.

The solution that makes sense is to harvest water in the areas where it is plentiful and bring it to the Basin. If they could do so much back in the 1900's with the limited engineering and technological resources available to them back then, I can only imagine what should be possible with the amazing resources available now!

Conclusion:

The proposed SDLs will have far reaching and horrendous impacts on farming communities in the Murray Darling Basin and they cannot be determined by the Authority just "exercising its judgement" (page xvi of the Guide).

The proposed Basin Plan in its present form needs to be discarded and started again, preferably with new Authority members, ensuring that this time a balanced plan is produced. The present plan does not "maximise net economic returns to the Australian community from the use and management of Basin water resources". It also does not "promote the use and management of Basin water resources in a way that optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes" as specified in the Objects of the Water Act.

We need to look forwards not backwards and ensure Australia remains the best country in the world. Future generations should be able to enjoy living the Australian Dream but we will need a plentiful supply of food and water to do that. Water for food should be just as important as water for the environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of our family and all the farmers in the Murray Darling Basin as well as the communities who are dependent on them.