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*Submission on behalf of the Uniting Church to the House Standing Committee on
Regional Australia*

Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia

This submission will deal particularly with the **social, justice and welfare aspects** of the plan because these areas are our special emphasis and we believe these aspects cannot be divorced from our understanding that we live in God's created world and we have a responsibility to care for this. As many of our members are farmers we offer some comment on some **alternate water saving strategies**.

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- 2 The social and economic aspects of the Authorities as we see it from the community perspective Cotton Rice and horticultural areas specifically
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1 Who we Are.

This submission comes from the Uniting Church Presbytery of the Macquarie Darling. The vast bulk of our member congregations live within the Murray Darling basin where the direct effects of the plan will be realised.

Our members have requested that this submission be put forward representing their concerns and suggestions. Our members represent a diverse section of the Murray Darling population and wish their voices to be heard through the auspices of the Uniting Church and the faith perspectives the Uniting Church includes.

Uniting Church theology demands that our faith can and must speak on issues that are intrinsic to the daily lives of its members, the communities we share and the environment that sustains us.

The Uniting Church has over 280 churches spread across the NSW and the ACT, all of which are situated in the Murray Darling Basin.

Examples of the diversity of our churches include regional cities such as Dubbo, Wagga Wagga, Griffith, Tamworth, Bathurst and Orange. Some of the medium sized towns that have UCA congregations are Parkes, Moree, Gundagai and Deniliquin. Villages such as Trangie, Howlong, Coleambally and Boggabri have UCA churches. We also have members in localities such as Menindee, Packsaddle, Hallsville and Gunningbland.

Dr Rol Mitchell's book, "Country Life and the Church" documents the valuable contribution made by churches to the social fabric of rural communities. Dr Mitchell relates how the bulk of volunteer work is carried out by largely church people who are older and wish to contribute to their communities. The knowledge base this group of people have about the changes in community life, social practices, agricultural developments and environmental changes is invaluable.

The Uniting Church also represents significant migrant communities in the Riverina. Our Churches include people originating from Korea, the Cook Islands, Fiji, and Tonga. And we are proud to have specific aboriginal chaplaincy and community services.

The Uniting Church through Uniting care is a significant provider of aged care and community services across the Murray Darling Basin working with and for local communities to increase individual and community well-being and renewal.

Over the last ten years due to changes in the demography of rural NSW, the challenges of rural recession and the impacts of drought the Uniting Church has been called to respond to the needs of the people with a variety of ministry and service models. These include Patrol Ministries in the Broken Hill, Nyngan and Cobar regions. A Rural Consultants-advising and advocating on rural issues across NSW. And two rural Chaplains who have been working in the Murray Darling Basin and beyond providing workshops, mentoring leaders, encouraging service development and co-ordination to encourage local community development and increase rural resilience.

A response from those living and working in rural communities

The Uniting Church has responded to perceived injustices on a variety of issues throughout its history. In this tradition we are now responding on behalf of our people who live and work in the Murray Darling Basin and those who we support in these communities.

We believe that the MDBP fails to address socio- economic affects regional communities especially regarding food production, business activities in rural communities and the impacts on community well being.

A fair and sustainable way forward should include adequate alternative means of economic development for affected communities but most importantly strategies to ensure sustainable food production for the whole of Australia.

Because we are such a broadly spread church and include a diversity of views we are planning a survey of our people within their communities. These opinions will form a more comprehensive response that we will forward to the government by March 2011

Basic assumptions behind the plan that we as a church are particularly concerned about are:

- Farmers are not environmentally aware enough to be allowed the freedom to farm according to their understanding of best practise.
- It is possible to quantify in a complex ecosystem accurately the needs of flora and fauna?
- There is a benchmark year and time period from when all systems can be sustainable to?
- It is assumed that there are no alternative strategies except legislation. Nothing will happen unless it is legislated?
- That a small section of the community should bear the brunt of any community adjustment?
- The primary measure of community well-being is based on economic analysis focused on short-term outcomes.

This submission will deal particularly with the social, justice and welfare aspects of the plan because these areas are our special emphasis and we believe these aspects cannot be divorced from our understanding that we live in God's created world and we have a responsibility to care for this. As many of our members are farmers we offer some comment on some alternate water saving strategies.

2 The social and economic impacts of changes proposed

We recognise that some changes are needed.

The 'BasinPulse' reveals that people realise that changing water management is a shared responsibility and not a government only responsibility (Basin Pulse Nov.2010). We agree with this position, which the Pulse reports are the opinions of the majority within the Basin.

We strongly disagree with The Authority's claims that a 3 to 4,000 G litre reduction of irrigation water will reduce the Basin's gross value of irrigated agriculture production by \$800 mil/yr (13% of current estimates). The flow on effect to regional economies would only cause a reduction of 1.1% to Gross Regional Product and a Basin wide reduction of 800 jobs.

For example in a small community such as Yeoval (300 population) the moving of two farm families has reduced the school size and the teaching staff by one teacher. This also reduces the number of persons for community activities and sports teams and brings into question the size and continuity of the school bus operation. The turnover of the local stores are affected, the viability of the local multipurpose health centre is now under threat of closure which would mean two more staff lose their jobs. There will be more vacant houses in the village. The jobs at the multifunction health centre may only have been additional income for some farm spouse but that income has kept that farm operating over the drought years.

The smaller the community the more significant the impact of a loss of one single family to the viability and community wellbeing.

The work done by Judith Stubbsⁱ shows that it will not only be small communities that feel the impact. With a 50% reduction in water for Agriculture Griffith will lose 25.2% of its population (part 4, page 33)

The MDBP will impact on 22% of the Basin population of 3.4mil who live outside urban centres within the Basin. These are the people who will be radically affected in the same way as Yeoval and Griffith. The proposal suggestion that there will only be 800 permanent jobs is inaccurate and under represents the full impact of the plan.”

The reduction of income for irrigated production when this is translated into the impact on individual properties (with accumulated debt because of drought or capital investment for improvement or development of irrigation) is extremely serious. The MDBP indicates the Basin population live on less than the average weekly wage compared to the rest of Australia. A reduction in income of 30% would increase the strain on families, reduce the asset value of farms which may make the locally owned farm non-viable .

This is especially true of Murrumbidgee rice farmers whose farms are specific purpose and too small for diversification.

Targeted Cotton areas of NSW

The plan indicates a 20 -30% Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) will have the most serious and direct impact on the cotton producing regions of the state. These regions are indicated to be the Balonne, Gwydir, Namoi, Border Rivers McQuane and Lachlan Basins. A 20% cut in water allocations will affect most seriously the vulnerable towns and communities of Goondiwindi, Wee Waa, Moree, Warren, Narrabri. (Economic and Social Impact Assessments MDBP July 2010, Sect 58)

Our experience of ministry in these communities is that that these areas include some of the most disadvantaged communities and peoples in Australia.

Many aboriginal people rely significantly on casual work on cotton farms. The aboriginal people from Coonamble for example travel to the cotton fields for work at Boggabri and Wee Waa. These towns are some of the most ‘community sensitive’ identified in the Sect 36 of the ESIA.

The ABARE report of the ‘2005 Outlook Conference’ indicated this was one of the most vulnerable areas for structural readjustment for broad acre agriculture. Their vulnerability index included an analysis based on: Human, Social, Natural, Physical and Financial criteria. This area of the state also has some of the most agricultural reliant communities and they have very little alternative employment or business opportunities to maintain their infrastructure and existence.

Businesses, schools, health services have already been decimated by the population decline in agricultural turnover over the last 10 years due to drought and may not survive the erosion of confidence to rebuild with the possibility of reduced water capacity for cotton. The WeeWaa community commissioned an analysis of the loss of people because of the drought and its affect on the community.

If the recommendations from the MDBP are implemented in a blanket way across this area. Many of these towns and communities will struggle to continue to exist.

Dairy Horticultural and rice areas of NSW

Dairy, Rice and horticultural farmers have been identified as more sensitive to increased levels of the Sustainable Diversion levels SDL' Basin Guide & ESIA sect 34 The report indicates more of the farmers in these industries, especially rice, will exit the industry if cuts in water are 20% or more. The alternatives for these farms set up for such specific use is very limited. They are too small, over capitalised and the soil type and the low annual rainfall of their area restrict alternate income use.

The ESIA Sect 59 indicates at 20% reductions, many smaller rice farms especially will be unviable.

The communities we understand to be most sensitive to the proposed variety of SDL changes are along the Murrumbidgee. Centres such as Leeton, Coleambally, Narrandera and Griffith. Griffith has the highest percentage of the larger urban centres employed in agriculture and food with 21.5%.within the basin.

Leeton with 20% s is extremely vulnerable because it is an even smaller community. Much of Leeton's employment is in the rice mill and agricultural training.

There are groups of people who are not always considered in the figures used for analysis, that have come to our attention because of our work with them. Our experience in the church is with Pacific Islanders and others who come to Griffith to work with the horticultural and intensive agricultural industries. These Pacific Island children make up to 35% of the school population in Griffith alone. Similarly a large number of backpacker and grey nomads contribute to the economy of these centres. The casual work in these industries are a significant income for overseas and grey nomad travellers, they are part of the overseas traveller appeal.

Due to adverse weather conditions in the Young district the cherry and stone fruit harvest has been decimated for 2010. Anecdotal evidence from growers is showing that the contribution made to the Young community from the casual labour force will have a great affect on the local economy.

If the MDBP recommendations are enforced across this sector the viability of many of the listed towns, villages and communities will be brought into question.

Of the 69 local government areas in the NSW part of the Basin 62% of these LGA's (43) already have populations of less than 10,000 and already, most struggle with viability problems (Socio Economic Context MDBP Technical report BP02)The planned reduction of SDL's will mean with a declining population, and rate paying base the struggles of these shire will exacerbate their issues.

3 Questioning the impacts

We question the following statement made by the Authority in the report :

' The Authority recognises that the impacts of the necessary adjustments fall on the current generation of farmers and irrigators, industries and communities. This is why it is essential that effective transitional arrangements be put in place to help businesses and individual water entitlement holders adjust to change and why action must be taken to maintain strong and prosperous regional communities'

Why **must** the impacts fall on:

These peoples in the Basin region who have been identified as proportionately the eldest, with the lowest education levels post school and one of the lowest dependency ratios. (Workers/elderly) The Murrumbidgee dependency rate is under 50 (MDBP BP02)

In the remote regions of the Basin the indigenous population has increased by 13.7% over a 10 year period while the non indigenous population has declined by 13.3%. Towns with more than 20%

indigenous populations include Moree, Wellington, Condobolin, Lightning Ridge, Coonamble and Bourke MDBP BP02

There has been a restructuring of farming happening across the world in agriculture with 2 % of people leaving farming each year in western countries such as Germany, the UK and Canada. (IAAKSTD Agriculture at the Cross roads 2009 World Bank & FAO report.)

<http://www.agassessment.org/>

The Basin shows a decline up to 2006 of 7.4% of farmers compared with a national average of 9%. Anecdotaly we believe the decline would have accelerated even more since 2006 with the continuing drought and compounding farm debt. (Socio Economic Context for the MDB BP 02 Sept 09)

In 2009 the UCA completed a submission outlining the churches activity to address the social impacts of the drought. In this submission we identified and detailed that our church people on their own initiative are providing social and recreational activities and community services across the basin area. This is a real reflection of the social impact because most communities that have a population of 2,000 have up to 60 volunteer organisations. A town of 5,000 plus will have 130 volunteer organisations. The difficulty that the MDBP will exacerbate is the time and number of people available to maintain the social capital of these communities. Many of our church people belong to up to 6 community organisations. They will not have the capacity to pick up additional activities with the induced MDBP decline in population. Many Shires, Sport groups, Racing clubs, school councils and P&C's, SES, Fire brigade groups, Rotary groups, Red cross, Church councils, theatre groups already struggle for membership and committee volunteers. We regularly hear about farmers who indicate they do not have the money to come to town as frequently or the time to go onto committeesⁱⁱ.

Our Rural Chaplains have been focusing on building community confidence and resilience as people cope with rural restructuring and drought difficulties in some of the smaller village centres. One of the Authorities observations that the Chaplains support, is that the government must *strengthen the adaptive capacity of each community*. We would go further and suggest the government must provide support for programs and initiatives that build community capacity and include community members in their planning and implementation.

The fundamental premises of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) NSW and ACT Synod for rural Australia are:

- *The Synod supports the continued survival and existence of the small family farm as a basic unit for the sustainability of Rural NSW.*
- *The Synod supports the principle that Australia needs to maintain a viable agricultural industry.*
- *The Synod supports the principle that maintenance, survival and strengthening of small rural communities are vital to the future sustainability of rural Australia.*
- *The Synod supports the empowerment of local individuals to direct their own destiny.*

(Based on Assembly and Synod responses to issues)

4 Efficient water use... Producing more food with less water...

The Victoria/Tasmania Uniting Church Synod commissioned a report on the MDBPⁱⁱⁱ and they raise some issues about water efficiency that we would like to bring to the revue committee's notice.

Water is available in Australia by rainfall collection. Evaporation and soil recharge.

15% of the water in Victoria is believed to be surface runoff. This can be collected in dams, in creeks, in rivers. Why is this the major focus of the MDBP?

1% of water is considered recharge. This is water considered to be absorbed in the soil and gradually moving down into the local river artesian and sub artesian basins.

This sub artesian water recharge is managed and improved considerably by farming strategies such as water line farming and no-till farming. Improved farming methods have in recent years been increasing the water retention in the soil increasing yields and crop viability during drought. The implication of the MDBP plan is that this approach should be curtailed. Water line farming is being criticised by catchment groups because it is reducing water runoff.

Similar arguments can be made against soil conservation pasture improvement and native grass retention. In NSW they have legislated already about the amount of runoff allowed to be retained on farm based on rainfall resulting in a number of farm dams being disallowed or removed. It is difficult to look comprehensively at the figures because there does not appear to be a water run-off benchmark.

This style of soil management means that there is already improvement in the water use efficiency of many of the basins ecosystems in the upper basin areas. This has been going on for 50 years with incentives for management and farmer environmental care being the driving force.

84% of rainfall recycles through evaporation or transpiration. There are many engineering efficiencies that could save a considerable amount of water for the environment. Especially those identified in the Balonne area as shown in the ESIA sect 58.

Many growers in the Murrumbidgee area would like other options for water savings to be considered . One option is for growers is to sell some of their water entitlements to enable them to have the capital to upgrade their systems. Installing drip irrigation instead of flood irrigation. Installing spray irrigation to replace furrow irrigation and also cementing channels. Terry McFarlane from Griffith funded his upgrading by selling 500ml to the Government Water for Rivers to achieved this style of water .

The ABS report has identified that there has been an increase in food production using less water over the period 2005 -2009. In 2007 rice growers used 1.25ML of water to produce 1 tonne of rice. In 1997 they used 2 ML to produce 1 tonne.

A lot of water saving could be achieved by improving and encouraging efficiencies and best practice. This has been proven to be a very effective process with the government funded Land care program where growers have been given incentives to accelerate and afford the adoption of tree corridors, fencing of creeks, planting and maintaining natural native areas of land.

There is a window of opportunity to enable us to recruit and empower farmers to be environmental caretakers of the land. Already many farm groups are doing this as part of their strategy in farming. Holistic farmers are asked to establish their goals based on community dynamics, water cycle, mineral cycle and energy cycle. Many other farming groups have formed with similar strategies

where the environment is an integral part of their decision making process. Organic, Biodynamic, Waterline, Sustainable farming, No-till farming, Cell grazing, Grazing for profit are some of the farming groups that are taking this approach already and independently.

The Christian farmers Associations of NSW Vic and SA have had speakers promoting holistic approaches to farming that include environmental ecological and community responsibility.
<http://www.christianfarmers.org.au/>

We in the UCA would support this wholistic approach because we recognise human responsibility to care for the land is not independent from making a living from the land.

Water trading is identified to be not a fair system by the Vic /Tas Church analysis. Water trading can occur because of the pressure on some farms. It is not voluntary but forced by circumstance.

Water Trading will eventually price farmers and food growing out of the system. Already we see farmers transitioning from irrigation for pasture, to grain crops, to rice, to cotton, to cities based on an a price per litre of return.

House holders pay \$1.93KL for processed and treated water. Farmers pay 12c/KL for water they order and then trust to quality and reliability to produce a product that still has the potential to be damaged by the environment and suffer price penalties.

How can food compete if money is the defining item.

Already in America the battle between farming and the city of Les Vegas who want to draw water from the underground basin in another area of the state is a massive issue. Media release

The church would maintain that human society has an obligation to care for and maintain our environment because that was God's command to us. This command is balanced with the command to love and care for each

5 Bibliography

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