



Lesley Fischer

December 15<sup>th</sup> 2010

Submission

## **Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia**

### **Lake Albert – The Coorong – December 15<sup>th</sup> 2010**

**Author:** Lesley Fischer, wife, mother, grandmother and farmer. 5<sup>th</sup> generation in the Lake Albert district from a family of workers, not the landed gentry. Together with husband Mick and family we live and farm between the shores of Lake Albert and the Coorong. We ran an award winning dairy enterprise of 700 cows, combined with irrigation and value added with beef and cropping enterprises. We utilised the water for stock and domestic and irrigation with salinity of between 1500 ec units to 2000 ec units, direct from Lake Albert.

The water in Lake Albert due to its location at the end of the river system is regarded as some of the worst quality water in the MDBasin. Some of the farmers in this district including ourselves, were in the top 10% for producing quality milk in Australia.. This region provided Adelaide with 50% of its milk in Autumn. Dairying was one of the main employers in the district along with a vibrant fishing industry.

This has all but gone now. Due to inability to access water from Lake Albert, we made the decision to sell our high producing dairy herd consisting of 30 years of genetic gain, and close the dairy. With no water, the irrigation ceased. Leaving over \$4million of stranded assets lying dormant, a 50 unit computerised dairy, 8 centre pivots and underground piping, & electrics. A lone weather station that monitored our efficiencies of wind, evaporation, sub soil moisture, ensuring we managed every drop of water to the max.

As the drought set in upstream and water flow down the river was restricted, we saw the salinity levels in the lake rise and this impacted on our irrigated pastures, with a very high salt build up in our sub soils, that caused a reduction in plant growth.

Because we were regarded as progressive farmers and believed in growing our business to the maximum, we were left with a debt that still had to be serviced. Our spirit was crushed. We believed we were good at what we were doing and were happy to show case our business, and share our experiences to those from all over the world.

Right now, the water has returned to the MDBasin and down the River Murray and now out through the Murray Mouth. But Lake Albert is still grossly neglected. There are Government built walls or obstructions that stop

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natural flow and in turn Lake Albert is in a dire situation where the lake is unable to flush the saline water out. The removal of these obstructions, between Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert is paramount because of the potential irreversible environmental damage that has occurred in the past and will continue into the future.

The highly productive region of the Narrung Peninsular has lost its potential, with the loss of the water from the lakes. It would be safe to say that over 65% of its irrigation allocations have been sold out of the district and possibly to other irrigators upstream. The Narrung Peninsular was regarded as the “Jewel in the Crown” by the dairy companies for its milk production.

Because of where we live at the end of the MD Basin, we are acutely aware of what is happening upstream and know that we are the recipients of extractions and quality of water that is sent downstream.

The socio economics in our community was not taken into account. We as irrigators produced good returns using water of a quality deplored by upstream irrigators. We had no choice, we had no consultation, we had no time for change. The Murray Darling Basin Authority is giving us a chance to respond to the Briefing. This is our opportunity now to restore the health of the river as a whole. We should not be afraid to embrace change.

This region is part of the Internationally known RAMSAR treaty for the protection of its wetlands and bird life.

We have seen this environment die before our eyes, the loss of frogs, freshwater mussels, birdlife. The threat of acidification of our lake bed. The threat to our community, the stress, the anxiety, the loss of work, the loss of self esteem...all through no fault of our own.

We have an obligation to leave a better footprint for future generations.

### Background/Issues

**History and science shows us that Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina were natural fresh water lakes for the past 5,000 years. With the extractions of water from the river for irrigation that**

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**began in the late 1880's, the course of the river changed. The more water extracted less water flowing downstream and out through the lakes and to the Murray Mouth, changing the environment of the Lower Lakes System.**

1. 1968 South Australia capped its irrigation. The beginning of the State's water saving efficiencies.
2. In 1981, the Murray Mouth closed over. This should have been a warning that there was too much water being taken out of the system.
3. The Government in its wisdom, shortly after found that there was something called 'sleeper licences'. We were told to 'use them, or lose them'. That was the beginning of the end, water was either used or handed back to Government, which in turn sold it off to willing buyers.
4. During this time irrigation upstream expanded and water became a tradable commodity. Water was taken kilometres from its source. Flows diverted, contouring the land changed the water courses, water flowed down huge channels and into huge man made dams. The heart of Australia was opened up with water coursing its veins. With the introduction of fertilisers, the land produced crops of all descriptions, communities developed around these enterprises, throughout the entire Murray Darling Basin. The 'heady' days of development, 'rape and pillage' the land and waters, with no thought of the consequences of what tomorrow would bring.
5. Slowly the repercussions of the water extractions began to be felt further downstream, when in 2002 the dairy/irrigation community around Lake Albert began to feel the nervous tensions of the pain that drought was inflicting upstream in the Murray Darling Basin. Then the worse drought on record was upon us.
6. In 2006, SA Premier Rann announced that a temporary weir was to be constructed at Wellington. The fear of the weir construction had a significant impact on the communities downstream around the lakes. The pain and anguish felt by the community fearing an uncertain future was stress at its worst. We began to notice the lower lake levels, the impact on the birds, there was a 'quietness'.
7. In 2008, as a precautionary measure to stop acidification of Lake Albert, a temporary bund was constructed between Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina, effectively stopped the natural flow into

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Lake Albert. Lake Albert was on 'life support' pumping water and silt from Lake Alexandrina into Lake Albert, 'robbing Peter to pay Paul'! Acidification has been averted this time.

8. The most productive irrigation region of the Narrung Peninsular, was gone.
9. The highly productive dairy industry on the Narrung Peninsular was all but gone. The Narrung Peninsular supplied Adelaide with 50% of milk in Autumn. This is now gone.
10. The spirit of the proud innovative farmers on the Narrung Peninsular was crushed.
11. Mother Nature reigns supreme.....the rains came, the frogs returned in force, then the birds. There were smiles of the faces of those in the community. Just maybe we can turn things around, after all we have the cleanest of air straight off the Antarctic and the best temperate climate for growing stock and crops. All we need is for fresh water to return. But not yet, with salinity at 10,000ec units, we are still a long way off getting back to normal.
12. Fear of the wrath of those upstream who do not understand the importance of the necessity of the river system to flow and flush the 1000's tonnes of salt from its system, along with the contaminants, chemicals etc that have flowed into the rivers from further upstream and the effect of this on the environment further downstream.

### **Recommendations**

1. The MDB briefing was distributed, there was community outcry of the unknown, particularly following on from a most severe drought upstream. The fear being whipped up within the rural communities right along the MDB to the point of hysteria. There needs to be a time to stop and take a balanced view of what the water cuts mean to all communities.
2. There needs to be strong leadership to ensure that the health of the river system is paramount to ensure viability of rural communities into the future
3. The MDB needs to be managed as a whole.
4. There is an urgent need to address over-allocation.

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5. Government must look and take a hard stance on foreign ownership of land and of water.
6. There is a need to enact special water accounting in times of drought across the whole system.
7. Water efficient communities, those who have shown that they have done the efficiencies and have done so for years should be taken into account.
8. Water efficiency strategies need to be implemented, in the channels and man made dams.
9. Metering of water from river extraction and transmission of water through the channels and dams need to be taken into account.
10. It is essential that the rivers flow and flush the salts and impurities right out of the river system to the sea. Something like 2 million tonnes of salt are purged from the river every year.
11. There needs to be a fair and equitable approach to sustainable diversion limits.
12. Need end of river flow target...we should not plan for anything less than 3000GL/yr minimum.
13. It should be fair and equitable throughout the system for all, the environment, the communities and for the irrigators.
14. Governments of all persuasions have created this irrigation debacle and communities have built up around the irrigation districts. It is now the responsibility of the Government to give back to the rural communities. For those communities who have to make changes, there needs to be strategies and funding to assist and adapt.
15. It is time the Government took a good hard look at rural Australia. There was a time that Australia rode on the sheep's back. Rural Australians were proud Australians. We were told the consumer demanded quality products, we produced those quality products at a cost to our own businesses. Yet we are still competing against a cheaper imported product that has questionable quality.
16. We, in Australia are highly regulated. We are playing on a level playing ground, but we haven't got anyone to play with.
17. It is now time that Government stepped up and announced that there be a concerted effort to encourage growth in our rural communities with funding for education, health, agriculture, water and the family farm.
18. Family farms farm for the future generations.

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**Healthy Environment = Healthy Community = Healthy Economy**

Lesley Fischer (Mrs)