

Chairperson,
Standing Committee on Regional Australia,
P.O.Box 6021,
Parliament House,
Canberra. 2600

Submission No:	337	13-12-10
Date Received:	16/12/10	
Secretary:	Sc	

Dear Chairperson,

Re: Impact of the Murray Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia.

May I offer the following thoughts as my submission to the above enquiry.

I very strongly urge the enquiry committee to give the gravest consideration to the socio economic aspects of the Murray Darling Basin Commission report. I totally agree that the environment is in huge trouble and needs urgent attention, but I suggest in the strongest terms that people are every bit as important, and must be given at least equal consideration. I realise and agree that the rivers have been over-allocated to irrigation, and perhaps, to some industries, and this issue must be addressed.

I have lived in the south western irrigation areas for 45 years, at times within the influence of each of the Lachlan, Murrumbidgee and Murray rivers. I have worked on farms, sharefarmed and managed an irrigation farm in that time, as well as spending some time in the Stock and Station, farm supplies, and grain handling industries. I feel I have a good understanding of how these areas work and what their requirements are. I understand irrigation from the perspective of river pumpers, bore pumpers and government scheme operators.

Towns like Griffith, Deniliquin, Leeton, Mildura, and many others, are built on irrigation. Apart from Primary Production, many support industries exist solely because of that irrigation. A very substantial percentage of employment in those areas serves irrigation. You people know more about the flow on effect of that than I do.

If I take Griffith as an example, I see wineries and vineyards which would not be there if there were no irrigation. I see citrus orchards and farms growing carrots, onions, pumpkins, melons, etc., etc., and the packing sheds that prepare this produce for market. None of these would be there if it were not for irrigation. The average rainfall for the Griffith region will not grow **any** summer season crops, such as grapes, melons and pumpkins, nor would it grow satisfactorily a winter seasoned crop such as onion. All it will grow is winter cereals, such as wheat, barley and oats, and winter pasture, and average rainfall will only grow an average crop. Without irrigation, the area would consist of very large dryland grazing and winter cereal producing holdings. The required labour force would be a fraction of today's requirement there. And, once again, add on the flow on effect.

The many road transport companies in Griffith are of the size and prosperity that they are because of irrigation. It is they who deliver much of the region's primary produce to

Sydney and Melbourne markets daily. Some of the engineering firms specialise in manufacture of irrigation specific machinery and equipment, e.g. wine storage tanks and associated equipment. Some of the machinery dealerships specialise in grape harvesters and associated equipment, irrigated row crop and vegetable production equipment. There is a huge Crop Protection (herbicides, pesticides) and fertiliser supply sector there.

Griffith is a hugely diverse and prosperous community. I have, in the past, called it the most recession proof town in the country, and, while I have no figures to back that up, it speaks of the productivity of the town. Of course, it can hardly be compared with the mining towns of the west.

If it were not for irrigation, Griffith would be a small country town. The current population is something like 22,000. Without irrigation, I suggest the population would not exceed 5,000. I am serious. Irrigation is essential to maintain the current population in such a naturally dry area. But, *if the M.D.B.C. suggested irrigation cuts were implemented in full, I suggest that Griffith would shrink to something like 15,000 people.* With the deepest respect to those who suggested, that full implementation of the water cuts suggested in the Commission report, would result in a total of 800 job losses, throughout the Basin, they show a serious lack of understanding of the issues.

If the water cuts suggested by the Murray Darling Basin Commission are implemented in full, the effect on Griffith and towns like it would be absolutely devastating. Many of the support businesses I have mentioned would close their doors or scale down operations. Many irrigators would sell up. Someone else would buy the land with its associated water to add to their reduced water allocation, but overall, productivity would be greatly reduced. Employment, both on and off farms, would also be greatly reduced. Once again, think of the flow on effect.

I agree that some level of reduction in water allocation is necessary. Perhaps much of that can be achieved by efficiencies in delivery infrastructure, etc. Farmers are already making huge investments in irrigation efficiencies such as drip irrigation, *where suitable and justifiable*, laser leveling, drainage recirculation systems, etc. If the cuts are heavily implemented, serious unemployment will inevitably result. Where will all the people go? To the cities. There will not be many jobs for them in these towns. You can only create so many tourism jobs, and sluggish and dying towns don't attract many tourists. The situation would be similar for many, if not all, the other river and irrigation communities.

Another serious effect of heavy cuts to water allocations would be on both domestic and rural real estate values. Regional domestic real estate values are often half and less of their city equivalent, even in good times. If regional unemployment is high, the gap will be greater, making it virtually impossible for ordinary working people to relocate to larger centres and cities, and hope for any better than renting.

I have used the town of Griffith as an example because I know the town reasonably well, and because it is such a diverse town. It is a great example of regional prosperity. Cuts of

the magnitude suggested would drastically change that. The effect on smaller, less vibrant and less resilient towns, would be even greater.

I have no vested interest. I do not own land, nor am I involved in any business. I am just genuinely concerned that the right emphasis and balance be given to both rectifying the environment, and to the well being of the communities who live within the Murray Darling Basin.

Please Listen. I am not a red necked ratbag. There needs to be balance in this debate, and the original M.D.B.C. report totally lacked that.

Yours faithfully.

Brian Walker.