



Department of Social Work
Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

**INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN
IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**

Submission from

Gender Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research
unit, Monash University

20 December 2010

1. INTRODUCTION

The Gender Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research Unit (Monash University) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia to present some recent research findings that are very relevant to the debate surrounding the Basin Plan and the impacts of its implementation.

Through our team's recent research in some of the Murray Darling Basin communities we have a comprehensive understanding of the community context, needs and aspirations of many of the regional and rural residents that will be impacted by the proposed Basin Plan. Several recent GLASS projects that have involved interviews and focus groups with rural women and men across business, the community and health sectors and farmers have given GLASS a relevant context and understanding of the changes in rural communities and particularly the impacts on women. These projects include;

- Social impacts of declining water and ongoing drought in the MDB
- Impacts of climate change on women's health and wellbeing with a focus of violence (currently underway) and
- Recognising Women Leaders program project, which involved focus groups in MDB communities

We also understand the crucial role that rural women play in social, economic and environmental decision making in rural Australia and how supporting and enhancing their contributions will unlock new opportunities for their local community and economy.

This submission responds to the Terms of Reference of the Standing Committee on Regional Australia addressing the socio-economic impact of the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Authority's 'Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan' (the Proposed Basin Plan) on regional communities, with particular reference to the direct and indirect impact of the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities, including agricultural industries, local business activity and community wellbeing.

We believe that our broad and varied experience across the dimensions of gender, climate change, women's leadership, rural services and rural Australia more broadly ensures that we understand the complexities, interrelationships, and intricacies of the community and the policy environment. We are happy to support the work of the Committee further and provide copies of our research reports from which this submission draws.

Yours faithfully

Professor Margaret Alston OAM

Head Department of Social Work, Monash University
Director of GLASS Research Unit, Monash University

Contact details

Department of Social Work, Monash University, Caulfield campus, PO Box 197 Caulfield East VIC 3145

For further information or clarification please contact Professor Margaret Alston

2. BACKGROUND

The substantive part of this submission is drawn from recent research into the social impacts of declining water availability and ongoing drought in the Murray-Darling Basin that was funded by the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University. It was a one year project that explored an issue of critical national importance – the way farmers, families and communities are adapting to climate change, reduced water allocations and drought conditions.

The project explored individual and family adaptations, health and welfare impacts and investigated the service infrastructure currently available, and required, to assist people and communities to adapt to major social upheavals associated with declining water availability.

The reason this study was undertaken was to explore the new reality of severe water restrictions and major changes to water policy in irrigation areas and small communities in the Murray-Darling Basin system, which have exacerbated restructuring, drought and welfare stress. These areas have experienced ongoing drought conditions for several years and this has added a largely under-researched but critical dimension to the social impacts of ongoing drought. Not only do these restrictions impact at a national level on the ability of Australia to ensure ongoing food security, they also add to the stress and uncertainty being felt by the people and communities who grow Australia's food. It was felt by the research team that economic and environmental concerns have been prioritised over the social and human impacts resulting in little documented knowledge of the social, human and community impacts.

It is important to note the timing of the research, which was completed just prior to the release of the Guide to the Basin Plan. The impacts summarised below for the Committees consideration may well be exacerbated or intensified with the planned reductions in water allocations outlined in the Guide.

3. SUMMARY OF IMPACTS

3.1 Social impacts

Our findings indicate significant social impacts caused by ongoing drought and the new reality of changes to irrigation water allocation. Impacts include:

- increased bankruptcies;
- increasing poverty particularly amongst those associated with agriculture – farming families, farm workers and contractors;
- farming families forced to make decisions about whether they can continue to farm;
- limited funds causing difficult decisions as to how to stretch these across personal and farming costs;
- a significant rise in levels of stress and other health and mental health impacts;
- a need to source off-farm income;
- difficulty accessing and retaining employment;
- significant loss of jobs in small communities affected by drought;
- involuntary separation, particularly as women leave to find work elsewhere and men 'commute' away for work for extended periods of time;
- an inability to afford farm labour, putting pressure on women and children to work on-farm;
- particularly men being locked into farms because of the need to hand feed and water livestock;
- intergenerational conflict;
- marital conflict;

- increasing social isolation particularly amongst men;
- declining educational access amongst children;
- increasing feelings of alienation and mistrust;
- loss of social capital evidenced in a decline in social participation;
- stress caused by water politics and a lack of information dissemination and understanding;
- difficulties in accessing income support;
- older couples continuing in farming and putting retirement plans on hold;
- low levels of access to services;
- depopulation and a particular loss of young people and skilled people; and
- declining levels of individual and community resilience.

One of the most significant adaptations to declining water and reduced farm income is the need to source off-farm income, a trend in a declining job market that has had major impacts on family and community life. This is leading to increases in long distance commuting with both men and women sourcing work that is located a considerable distance from their home community. It is not uncommon for men to work 'away in the mines' for two weeks at a time. This causes severe disruption to family life not only when the men are away but when they return, they are exhausted and take several days and nights to recover. Meanwhile, the women at home are left with the full burden of work, child raising and looking after the farm (Whittenbury and Alston research in progress).

There are also many instances where women worked some distance away and this often involved being away from home for part or all of the working week. This resulted in men being isolated on the farm and increased the risk associated with accident and injury if there was no one close by to respond and render assistance. It also resulted in exhausted women trying to fit 'everything else', including farm work, into their limited weekend time and taking holidays during busy farm times so they can help on the farm.

An overwhelming majority of interviewees talked about the difficulty imposed by uncertainty and the emotional impact this had on them and their ability to feel they have some control over their lives.

3.2 Gendered impacts and adaptations

Our research reveals that years of drought induced hardship and uncertainty and declining water access has resulted in significant gendered impacts. Men are facing crises in relation to their identity and masculinity as their lives as farmers are under significant threat. This has led to significant health issues, increasing social isolation and a very real sense of grief and loss as they struggle with the physical reality of eroded landscapes and dying livestock and the likely loss of their farming identity (Alston and Kent 2008). Many are facing decisions about leaving farming as climate change and resultant new policies around water, reduce their options and their resilience – issues that significantly impact their view of rural masculinity (Alston and Kent 2008). These factors which are very much out of their control and unresponsive to continued hard work have significantly increased their stress and capacity to respond. What has added to their health and welfare issues is that they have limited input to policies (for example water policy) that affect their livelihoods and futures and that they feel demonised by a community view that farmers are somehow responsible for the water crisis in the Murray-Darling Basin.

The impacts for men include:

- the ongoing, daily reality of physically demanding tasks such as feeding and watering livestock;
- working daily in a barren landscape;
- becoming more socially isolated;
- mental health and welfare issues; and
- a feeling of 'emasculatation' because of the loss of the provider role.

Women, on the other hand, are working in a number of areas including on-farm, off the farm and in the community - often into advanced age. It is not unusual for researchers to interview health professionals and teachers in communities that have been affected by drought and declining water to find that these same women are from farming families, that they take their holidays in times of high work load on farm in order to contribute farm labour and that they are themselves extremely stressed by their circumstances. They can see no end to their working lives and they face stresses related to climate change both at work and at home.

What is also clear from our research is that women are constantly monitoring their husband's health, sometimes to the extent that they will turn off the radio or television if reports include bad news on weather, drought or water access. Women have taken on the role of guardians of men's health, often at the expense of their own and are continuing to work past retirement age to ensure their partners can remain in farming.

The impacts for women include:

- a critical need for them to source off-farm income;
- an enhanced role in on-farm work, community work and major responsibility for house hold and care work;
- a lack of care services (aged, child and disability) to assist them with their work;
- a perceived need to monitor the health of family and others;
- a marked lack of attention to their own health;
- low levels of decision making positions;
- low acknowledgement of their efforts in the private and public spheres of community and policy making levels;
- an acknowledgement that they are in 'work overload';
- a consequent acknowledgement of emotional overload and the need to make major life decisions; and
- advanced levels of stress.

Our research also reveals that adaptations to these impacts are gendered. Men are more susceptible to negative adaptations in the areas of health and welfare and are more prone to social isolation. Men may turn to alcohol and other drugs in order to cope with their situation, which can lead to further family problems including domestic violence (Whittenbury and Alston forthcoming). For both men and women, making informed decisions about their futures is difficult because many of the variables that might determine their future are out of their control.

Women's adaptations, while more positive in the sense that they are sourcing off-farm income and protecting their family members, are also negative because they ignore their own health and welfare and work hard in all areas of their lives. Women have adopted a natural caring role that extends beyond their family to their communities. In doing this, they are failing to care for themselves and there is a lack of responsive support to the very real emotional, health and welfare needs of women.

3.3 Social impacts of policy and implementation

Our interviewees reported that they feel abandoned by governments and that there is little support for their industries and communities as evidenced by water policy. Interviewees believe this policy prioritises environmental uses of water over irrigation for food production as government policy-makers respond to city-based interests that favour environmental outcomes.

From my perspective, and that of many others, there's a lack of high level government support for irrigated agriculture in this part of the world. (Male key informant)

I don't think it's got to do with the density of the holdings here, or the number of voters, I think there's just a general deficiency in political support for irrigation industries and the society and economy that it creates. There's been a renewed focus on the environment. (Male key informant)

Our sample did not provide accurate figures on the proportion of irrigators who have sold some or all of their permanent water entitlements. It would appear that this is an understated and somewhat 'hidden' response to financial pressures and may be utilised to generate much needed cash flow. A significant number of respondents indicated they had sold at least some of their water entitlements.

It seems that selling a portion of their water entitlements was a strategy adopted by irrigators to improve their financial position yet remain in the industry. At the time of our research the NSW Government announced an embargo on water being sold to the Commonwealth, which was hampering some respondents in their efforts to sell their water entitlements.

There was a strong view among a number of interviewees that irrigators were selling water out of 'desperation' caused by financial pressure associated with reduced and often negative income and there was a suggestion that women and men might have different views.

Water buyback is like 'giving morphine to a dying corpse' (Female, farm family)

It's the last thing that individual irrigators want to do (sell water), it's the last thing that Murray Irrigation want to do but many landholders are desperate to generate cash. (Male key informant)

... a Labor government is supposed to be big on social justice but in this instance they are looking at the market to get water from low value uses to high value uses and it's the anti-thesis of Labor party politics. But, there are big examples in my eyes of the market failure; firstly that the cap that the Victorian Government placed on sales has only just been moved, so that had put a focus in the New South Wales part of the basin, because of the nature of irrigation, particularly in the New South Wales Murray Valley where it's general security. Another source of market failure has been that the drought has had an inordinate impact in this Valley, in relation to other Valleys, so if the water buyback scheme had been introduced 5 years ago or in 5 years time, the level of willing sellers or desperate sellers in this part of the world would have been different. So, it's the timing of the market that is an issue there. The third area of market failure, in my opinion, is because the Government doesn't have a targeted approach, issues such as personal lifestyle preferences or the ability to source income off-farm is going to influence whether a particular landholder sells up or not. It has very little, or nothing, to do with water use efficiency, it's just their particular circumstances at that particular time. (Male key informant)

There was a very strong view among interviewees that the Commonwealth Government does not have a planned approach to water buy back – but was simply buying water from 'willing' sellers regardless of other considerations such as community or regional impact. In what has become known as a 'Swiss cheese' approach (Productivity Commission 2010: xxxii), there is no readily apparent planning around water purchases leaving a haphazard, geographically dispersed network of farms moving out of irrigated agriculture. Those remaining, most of whom have highly capitalised enterprises, are left to carry the infrastructure costs of a sophisticated but antiquated irrigation system requiring ongoing capital investment from a reduced number of stakeholders. Irrigators fear they will be left with 'stranded assets' – capital intensive irrigation farms that are no longer economically viable because the irrigation system does not have a sustainable number of farms sharing the costs.

Adding to the complexity of the issue is the fact that the information on who is selling their water has been kept secret, leading to high levels of uncertainty among farming families and communities as to whether their

areas are viable. Farmers have no way of knowing whether their neighbours have sold their water leading to increasing divisions, secrecy and mistrust. Many feel there might be greater benefit from a planned approach to purchases so that they are able to make informed decisions about their own futures. Our respondents reiterated concerns that irrigators selling their water may not necessarily be *willing sellers* but are more likely to be *forced sellers*. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC 2009) reported that 'the Federal Government has come under fire for not consulting local communities before buying back a record amount of water from the Murray-Darling Basin' and yet the eagerness of farmers to sell water is illustrated by a significant number of farmers reported as missing out because the federal government's financial limit had been reached (AAP(2) 2010).

There has also been concern at community level that water buyback will have an uneven impact on small towns in the irrigation regions and lead to a loss of services. In responding to this fear, the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE 2010: 24) notes that buyback will lead to a 2.4% decline in production and a 1.6% decline in irrigated land use. However ABARE (2010: 32 and 37) does note that their modelling does not include social costs and that the community effects will indeed be uneven and expose smaller towns to greater risk. Quoting Levantis (2001) the ABARE report notes a:

Strong inverse relationship between the size of towns and the level of farm household expenditure in the town economy per head of population. Towns with populations of less than 1000 appear to be particularly vulnerable to a change in farm household expenditure.

Nonetheless recent reports suggest that the buy back scheme has had significant environmental benefits. As water has returned to the river system 'frogs are breeding, aquatic plants are thriving and salinity has decreased' (AAP 2010).

We conclude that water policy is largely based on economic and environmental imperatives at the expense of social outcomes. The market is a blunt instrument, which leads to an uneven distribution of outcomes and can have significant negative social impacts for farm families and rural communities who have borne the brunt of the Australian community's need to revitalise its river systems. What has developed very quickly in Australia is a market for water as an economic commodity and its perceived worth has not included more qualitative valuing of water such social and community uses of water and its inherent benefits in these contexts.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

That both Commonwealth and State Governments place more emphasis on the social impacts of the changes to water and climate change policy during policy development and regional planning and development and that social elements have the same level of importance as economic and environmental considerations.

- That researchers, industry bodies, service delivery agencies, regional bodies and governments incorporate gender considerations as a key element of the understanding of social and economic impacts.
- That both Commonwealth and State Governments take immediate steps to work towards equitable gender representation on decision-making bodies relating to water policy development and implementation.
- That there be a stronger element of rural, regional and community planning incorporated into water policy.
- That adequate service infrastructure for affected rural communities be developed.

5. ATTACHMENT - ABOUT GLASS

The Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research Unit is located within the Department of Social Work in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University. The GLASS Research Unit undertakes high-quality, interdisciplinary research focusing on gender, leadership and social sustainability. GLASS builds on its research record to engage constructively in policy debates.

GLASS members have extensive expertise in gender analysis, social research and pursue a broad research agenda including: gender and climate change, violence against women, leadership and social sustainability.

The GLASS team are undertaking important research about the impact of gender issues on challenges facing societies around the world. It is also engaging with female leaders in our society to cultivate promising young female researchers from a range of backgrounds. The GLASS Research Unit is a dynamic unit where PhD students from a range of disciplines can work together on challenging issues facing Australia. IGLASS believes that it is only by properly valuing and encouraging the role of women in our society that we can realise our full potential.

Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AO, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia is the patron of GLASS and the research unit also has the benefit of an experienced Advisory Board chaired by Senator Judith Troeth. GLASS is lead by Professor Margaret Alston.

PROFESSOR MARGARET ALSTON (OAM)

HEAD DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK AND DIRECTOR GLASS

Professor Margaret Alston is the Director of the GLASS Research Unit and Head of the Department of Social Work, Monash University (B.Soc. Stud (Syd), Dip. Comp. Applic. (RMIHE), M. Litt (UNE), PhD (UNSW).

Margaret assumed duties as Head of Department in July 2008. Prior to commencing at Monash she was Professor of Social Work and Human Services and Director of the Centre for Rural Social Research (a subprogram of the Institute of Land, Water and Society) at Charles Sturt University. She is also an Honorary Professor at the University of Sydney. She has served on a number of Boards including the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women, Family Services Council. Family and Community Services Department in Canberra and the National Women's Advisory Group overseeing the Rural Women's Policy Unit in the Department of Primary Industries and Energy.

In 2008 she was appointed to the Australian delegation attending the Commission for the Status of Women meeting in New York. In 2009, 2007 and 2003 she has spent time as a visiting expert in the Gender Division of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation in Rome. She has also acted as a gender expert for UN-Habitat in Kenya in 2009. She has published widely in the field of rural gender and rural social issues. She has been a keynote speaker at a number of national and international conferences over the last several years and is sought out for media commentary on the rural social condition, and on climate change and gender issues.

Contact details

Gender Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research Unit
Department of Social Work, Monash University, Caulfield campus, PO Box 197 Caulfield East VIC 3145

For further information or clarification please contact Professor Margaret Alston