

SC

Submission to Standing Committee on Regional Australia

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

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) Guide to the Draft to the Plan for the Murray-Darling Basin, as it is currently proposed, has the ability to rip the heart and soul out of regional Australia and leave communities in electorates such as mine as nothing other more than ghost towns and a memory of what once was.

This Guide has been produced primarily to appease environmentalists and has considered little the ongoing and debilitating ramifications it will have on the incomes and lives of people who rely on the Basin as a means of generating a livelihood. This is a primary reason why I remain totally opposed to the Guide to the Plan as it is proposed and why I am writing to you to note my opposition.

Further, I see little evidence of what environmental outcomes will be achieved by setting aside the volume of water for the environment as proposed in the Guide.

The Riverina is without doubt the foodbowl of the nation. Riverina farming families form an imperative component of ensuring that quality, Australian-grown food remains on the dinner tables of Australian families. But this is at risk under the MDBA's Guide. The vibrant cities and communities of Griffith, Coleambally, Hillston, Leeton and Narrandera and the majority of the western half of the Riverina electorate will suffer considerable loss and the flow-on effects will be crippling. If the Guide is implemented in its current form, Australian farming families will go from world leaders to the bottom of the barrel, left with little choice other than to keep on farming with up to 43 per cent less water, or at the worst, leave the land altogether.

The Government continues to talk of buying water only from willing sellers, however, we all know desperate times make for desperate sellers and with declining confidence in regional economies because of the scale of proposed cuts in water allocations and with banks pressuring farmers to repay mounting debts, it will leave some generational farmers with little option.

The MDBA is on a course to appease environmentalists who will in turn be the ones who then complain about the higher prices of Australian-grown food at the supermarket. All this will achieve will be higher prices for families at the supermarket and the dominance of cheaper, inferior foreign imports on the dinner tables of Australian families. Rest assured is this eventuates, regional Australia, and the Riverina, will lose.

As it stands, the Guide is not in the national interest and must be changed.

I cannot, in all good conscience as the local member, stand idly by and watch as my constituents are left literally high and dry. I cannot be responsible for inducing unnecessary pain on the hip-pockets of Australian families who have enjoyed the vastly superior food that Basin and Riverina farmers have produced for generations. I cannot merely watch as cheap, foreign and inferior imports flood our markets.

The farmers who are targeted in these cutbacks are the same stoic and resilient farmers who've endured a decade of drought. The same people and families who have laboured in vain in the hope that the rains would come and that they could get a decent harvest, year after year, only to be let

down again. These are the same people whose hopes of a bumper harvest in 2010 were cruelly thwarted at the 11th hour by Mother Nature with devastating floods right in harvest season.

While it is the farmers who are targeted in this plan, the ramifications will spread further than the farm gate. If there are no irrigators in Coleambally and similar irrigation communities within the Basin, there will be no children to enrol in the local school, no people to shop in the community and they will be reduced to ghost towns.

This Guide in its present format attacks the Riverina, the nation's foodbowl and the consequences of its implementation will be dire. According to world-renowned agriculturalist and environmentalist, Norman Ernest Borlaug, "no civilisation, as it is known today, could not have evolved, nor can it supply, without an adequate food supply." And the Guide, as it was first released, attacks the food suppliers of this nation.

According to the Water4Food website, the Basin and the Riverina is responsible for:

- In 2005-06 (the most recent available regional data) the gross value of production was \$2.2 billion
- Nearly one-tenth of Australia's total agricultural production
- One-quarter of New South Wales's total agricultural production

The area produces:

- 98 per cent of Australia's rice
- Summer and winter grain crops

Agriculture directly employs some 30,000 in the region or 37% of total regional employment – six times greater than the Australian average for agriculture, and, in turn:

- Processing of agricultural products employs an additional 17,000
- Even with a conservative multiplier effect of 2.5, there are very few jobs and local businesses in the region which are not reliant on the fortunes of the food production sector
- With such a high dependence on agriculture, the resilience of the local economy/employment to cope with losses of agricultural production is extremely low.

Agriculture is the driver of regional communities and certainly much of the impetus in the Riverina electorate is derived from it.

Recently an initiative began in NSW called Evocities to attract metropolitan dwellers to move to regional cities. It is a bold campaign – a very worthwhile project. However, the Basin Plan, if it adopts the cuts proposed in the initial Guide or anything near them, will have an opposite effect – a depopulation of regional communities. No-one wants that.

We all want a healthy river system – a vibrant ecological future. No-one wants this more than irrigation farmers who for years have improved their farms, achieved water savings efficiencies and did their best to protect that which is the lifeblood of their operations.

I sincerely hope this submission, alongside the sensible and thoughtful data and testimonials to be considered as part of the Regional Standing Committee on Regional Australia's Parliamentary Inquiry into the social and economic implications of any Plan, will assist this House of Representatives' committee to determine that the ultimate Plan to be signed off by the Minister responsible must benefit not ruin regional Australia.

Yours Sincerely

Mr Michael McCormack MP

Member for Riverina