



Tumbarumba
SHIRE COUNCIL

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**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACTS
OF THE MURRAY DARLING BASIN PLAN IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**

ON BEHALF OF TUMBARUMBA SHIRE COUNCIL

The Murray Darling Basin Plan has the potential to change the future of agriculture and the fabric of communities in the basin.

It is Council's view that the plan has taken a very one-eyed look at the issues facing the Murray Darling Basin, by starting with a relatively uncritical look at the environmental assets that should be protected, assessing the water requirements of those assets, and then removing the water from the rest of the system by 'buyback'.

It is Council's view that the environmental objectives should be more critically evaluated. Those environmental assets that are man-made, or fundamentally altered, should not be protected at any cost, or at the expense of communities that would otherwise be viable. Little regard is had to the water savings that may be obtained by the provision of better infrastructure, and the devastating impact of the proposals on the communities of the basin.

Take the Coorong for example. We have created the freshwater environment in the Coorong, and now there is a whole industry based there. The environment we are trying to protect is man-made, fundamentally altered from what existed before the white man, and unsustainable in the Australian landscape. By the time the water reaches the Coorong, we have lost most of it in evaporation, and the quantity of water needed to sustain this artificial environment is provided at the cost of otherwise viable communities.

The economic cost of evaporation losses should be considered throughout the plan. Water should be appropriately priced to reflect the cost of infrastructure required for supply, and the value of produce grown from that water. There should be no structural impediments placed on development of irrigation opportunities closer to the source, as this water is both economically and environmentally the cheapest water in the basin.

The plan highlights the amount of water taken for re-forestation, however there is no acknowledgement of the increased run-off across much of the system due to clearing of the landscape over the past 150 years. It would be interesting to know how water past clearing has contributed to the water now available in the system. The plan is silent on the effect of significant bushfires in the headwaters, and the water being taken by the regrowth.

Who pays for the proposals in the plan? At the moment the farmer is bearing the brunt of the cost. His returns are being impacted by cheap imports from countries that have no respect for their environments, and it is the population that is heavily based in the cities who are buying these cheap goods. Serious consideration should be given to establishment of an environmental levy to be applied in similar fashion to the medicare levy, which may fund the infrastructure needed to deliver required environmental outcomes, whilst lessening the impacts on basin communities.

Given the huge evaporation losses as water travels down the system, consideration should be given to mid river storages, which can be filled in winter/spring when water inflows are at their height, and evaporation losses are minimal. The plan is silent on this option. In 2006, the river would have been dry for much of its length without man-made storages. From being gung-ho about creating storages everywhere in the 50s, we have now done an about u-turn and refuse to consider any, which seems equally ridiculous. However, this does not justify water storages such as the Menindee Lakes with large surface area and high evaporation loss. The same volume of water used in agricultural production by Cubbie Station is lost by evaporation in the Menindee Lakes... and how much water is lost in the water that travels from Cubbie Station to the Menindee Lakes?

Council is sympathetic to the plight of those communities that rely upon irrigated agriculture for their future, and were not consulted prior to the release of the Guide. Socio-economic impacts, and the potential for water savings through improvements to irrigation infrastructure should be considered and costed as a first priority, before SDLs are established. It may well be that many communities may remain viable with the right investment in infrastructure, and the desired environmental outcomes will still be delivered.

No water buyback should be undertaken without consideration of the impact of buybacks on the sustainability of irrigation districts. It would be better to take marginal or unviable districts out of the system rather than indiscriminately purchase water entitlements and risk destruction of otherwise viable irrigation schemes.

The failure to consult local farmers and rural communities ignores the wealth of on-ground knowledge that is available to help solve the problems confronting the basin, which in some instances may be superior to the academic 'wisdoms' that underpin the document. Farmers recognise that their future lies in husbanding the basin's environment. Scientists have got it wrong in the past and will again in the future. Let's use all resources available to find solutions.

The guide as presented has taken the easiest option to address the needs of the basin. There has been no critical look at the assets that are to be protected. The guide then proposes the simplistic option of water buyback to protect those assets, and substantially ignores the communities dependent on the basin's water, the economic cost of the water and potential structural efficiencies that could be gained by better utilisation and transport of water. The latter approach would take a lot more consultation and hard work. However, the knowledge does exist, and this knowledge does not necessarily reside in the scientific community. If we all work together, Council is confident that a solution can be found that addresses the critical needs of the environment, the basin communities, and the country.

We would like an opportunity to speak to this submission.

Signed –

Kay Whitehead
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