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Guide to The Basin Plan

Some observations from a retired Public Servant who has spent 40+ years studying water management of irrigated crops in the NSW Riverina. I was raised, and have lived in this region most of my life and all my research studies have been in the Murrumbidgee and Murray Valleys. As part of my professional work, and in a private capacity, I have traveled to most parts of the Basin.

The preparation of the material published in the Guide, and no doubt in the, as yet to be released chapters, of the Guide and/or draft have involved a huge undertaking and provide a comprehensive and potentially very useful basis for **sensible** decisions to be reached.

- It would appear that the public is being **deliberately misled** by the continuing use of the term 'allocation' instead of 'entitlement'. One could argue that the river systems have been over **entitled** but they are not over **allocated**, at least with regard to surface water. State authorities set the allocation each year, dependent on the amount of water available for distribution. In recent seasons this has often been zero, even in traditionally reliable valleys.
Why does the guide not publish a table of the **actual** allocations (and actual usage) since, say, 2001/2002 rather than continually claiming that the resource is over allocated?
- The plan seems to be driven by a desire (who is doing the driving?) to keep the mouth of the river open 90% of the time. Was this the case historically? Who was there to record whether it was open or closed before the barrages were installed? It seems the plan is based on 'modelling' rather than fact. Without the upstream storages the river would have been dry downstream of Echuca for most of the last 5-6 years (and by implication the mouth closed).
- The 'mouth' of the Murray should be considered to be where it flows into L Alexandrina. Describing it as occurring where the lakes connect to the sea is like claiming that the mouths of the Yarra and the Barwon are at Port Phillip Heads, not where ~~they~~^{they} flow into the bay!! ~~see p 51~~
- L Alexandrina and L Albert should not be classified as part of the Ramsar listed wetland – the declaration should be restricted to the Coorong. The lakes only come into play because of the barrages ie. they are not natural wetlands that **need to be saved** for the benefit on mankind.
- Why did the 'bureaucrats' declare a Ramsar wetland at the end of a very long, predominantly intermittent, river system(s) on the driest continent on earth? If this absurd decision was revisited and then rescinded then most of the other issues would 'go away'. At present, one fisherman and 2-3 dairy farmers who are trying to irrigate from a lake that is not and **never was** fresh, with respect to salinity, are continually making the headlines (as recently as last week in Canberra – mid-

November). What about everyone else who have built their existence and enterprise around access to irrigation water?

- In Table 1 – Without development. There appears to be a substantial error relating to the 'Murray downstream of Wentworth'. A volume of 1720 GL/y is listed as 'water used by environment and losses'. This should appear as a subtraction in the outflows column. The Basin total should read **10,104 GL/y** not **12,503** as tabled. (Values for the Barwon-Darling and Lower Darling, where losses also exceed inflows have been subtracted correctly in the Outflows column) *

When transferred to Table 5.2 the Outflow for the Basin total as a %age of without development **increases to 51%** (it is shown as **41%**). One assumes that this would lead to a substantial increase in the %ages 'credited' to the Murray in Fig. 6.6 for both the current level of use and for the additional 3,000 GL/y scenario.

There are other errors in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 but these appear to have been 'corrected' further 'down' the tables.

- **Why the rush to implement the plan?** If we have stuffed it up it has taken a long time. Right now, after a wetter than average winter/spring and summer flows down the Darling one could argue that we do not have a problem to fix. The plan wants it all to occur within 5 years – why not 10 or 15 or even 20. This would allow time for water buybacks and infrastructure improvements to have some serious impact. At least 10 years would allow 5 years for the **impact of the Victorian contribution** (substantial megalitres involved here) to work through the system.
- It is time to slow down the buyback from 'willing sellers'. They can sell within the 'system' if they want to get out of the irrigation industry. At present, this easy option is being pursued to keep the South Australian politicians on side - little to do with practical commonsense decisions about water use and river health.
- The plan seems to totally ignore the work that the NSW State Government has undertaken with respect to groundwater entitlements. Most people would agree that the major aquifers have indeed been 'overallocated' but this has now been addressed through the groundwater management plans. It should also be pointed out that much of the development, especially on the Gwydir, Namoi and Macquarie, was actively encouraged by State Government employees. The more water they could sell the more the State Treasury liked 'them'!
- The guide suggests that ABARE modelling indicates that only 800-1000 jobs will be 'lost' in the long term. This is obviously incorrect. I understand the model used **allows and assumes** those people who are 'put out of work' can all fly to WA and get a job in the mining industry – how absurd can they get.
- The guide compares a 'normal' year, 2000/2001 with 2005/2006 based on value of production. A more realistic approach is to compare the **product itself**, not the

*If I am right this no.
needs to be corrected
ASAP before it becomes
fact (albeit a modelled
one!)*

value. Some examples of why using the value is misleading: (i) in 2005/2006 dairyfarmers had to spend substantial dollars on sourcing fodder from off farm to keep their cows alive and hopefully producing milk. They did not have the water to grow their own (ii) MIS money enabled the purchase of temporary water at very high prices (they were able to outbid everybody else). Without access to this money up front a large percentage of the almonds, olives and grapes managed by these schemes may have been abandoned (as was the case for many of the traditional growers) with a large negative effect on production.

- The guide claims that it is necessary to export 2 Mt of salt through the mouth. Why not just past Wellington? I understand that most of the users of water from the Lower Lakes now have access to piped water. If they all had access to piped water there is no need for these lakes to maintained fresh. **Even before this wet year, the salinity levels in the Murray have been as low as at any time for which we have measurements, all the way to Wellington.**
- If the barrages must stay than we should manage the Lower Lakes and the Coorong as separate entities. It makes much more sense to use other sources of water to reduce salinity in the Coorong eg. by pumping in sea water in to the SE 'end', pumping water from L. Albert (channel and pumps!) and re-directing run off water from SE South Australia via Salt Creek (are there others?). Flushing large volumes of water from L Alexandrina through the mouth seems to be an extremely wasteful use of a scarce resource.
- The guide suggests that to maintain a 'connect' between the Coorong and the Southern Ocean a flow through the mouth of 2,000 GL/y is required. Why not **keep dredging when necessary**. Surely this should be the approach of a 'clever' country not blessed with surplus runoff water.
- The data presented in Fig. 8.5 seems to be **selective**, in that 1983 and 1984 were wet years following a severe and widespread drought in 1982. This indicates what is widely recognised – given water **somewhere** in the basin the bird numbers can increase rapidly. The projection displayed suggests that even splashing around an additional 4,000 GL/y will not have a major effect on numbers.
- A number of photos in the guide, and even more in the Technical background Part 1, seem to have been deliberately chosen, **and captioned**, to convince the uninformed reader that the Basin really is in dire straits eg. p.111 of the Guide Overview; Vineyard East of Morgan during **drought** – it looks like this in most seasons. It is in a Mediterranean climatic zone!; p 77 of the Technical background depicts trees that have died because engineering works changed a lake that experienced wet and dry times into one that was used as an off river storage – they died because of **too much** water rather than not enough; p. 201 of the Technical background is captioned 'baling a failed cereal crop at Oaklands' – it failed because of the lack of spring rainfall – nothing to do with environmental

flows; p. 301 of the Technical background shows a photo of the Bathurst water treatment plant – again not a lot to do with environmental flows!

- Table 5.2 in the Guide overview shows a value of 1506 GL/y for 'water used by environment and losses' for the Barwon-Darling catchment. This seems to be very high when compared with 645 GL/y for the Lower Darling which includes the Menindee Lakes. I understand that most of the 'hydrological action' in the Barwon-Darling is confined the river channel and one would expect a lower number than for the Lower Darling.

Sincerely,

John Thompson,

Sussan.

*A copy of my
response to the
Guide.*

*see p. 2. **