



Our reference: 10/3808

The Committee Secretary
House Standing Committee on Regional Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

**Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia –
Submission of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council**

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council (**NSWALC**) appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission to the House Standing Committee on Regional Australia; Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia.

To provide context to the following comments it must be noted that; NSWALC is the peak representative body for Aboriginal people in the state of NSW and is statutorily recognised as such under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*. NSWALC advocates for the socio-economic and cultural rights of all Aboriginal peoples in NSW, with a particular focus on those of the State's 119 Local Aboriginal Land Councils and their approximately 20,000 members.

The Proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan

It must firstly be stated that NSWALC recognises the need to take action to preserve the environment of the Murray-Darling Basin Area (**Basin Area**). Since time immemorial the environment of the Basin Area has provided Aboriginal peoples with cultural, spiritual, physical and economic nourishment and its degradation has had significant impacts. At the same time, the spoils of the broader economy have largely flowed past the Aboriginal communities of the Basin Area. As such the undeniable harms of dispossession have been felt strongly by both Aboriginal communities and the natural environment of the Basin Area.

The attempt of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (**Basin Plan**) to remedy the harm done to the environment must not impose further harm, directly or indirectly upon Aboriginal peoples who comprise the most socio-economically vulnerable sector of the regional communities of the Basin Area.

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On this basis and in light of the comments that follow, NSWALC provides the following recommendations:

1. The Government must direct special consideration and specific measures toward the potential socio-economic impacts of the Basin Plan on the Aboriginal peoples and communities of the Basin Area; and
2. The Government must genuinely partner with the network of Aboriginal Land Councils across the NSW portion of the Basin Area to develop and deliver economic development measures to mitigate the potential socio-economic impacts of the Basin Plan on the Aboriginal peoples and communities of the Basin Area.

Demographic considerations

Census data indicates that there were approximately 70,000 Aboriginal people living in the Basin Area in 2006, comprising 3.3% of the Basin population, and 15% of the national Indigenous population. However it is significant to note that the Aboriginal population of the Basin Area is increasing relative to that of the non-Aboriginal population. The Aboriginal population grew at a rate of 17% from 2001 to 2006 compared with the modest 3% growth of the broader Basin population. It is also suggested that migration patterns principally underpinning this trend are expected to continue¹. As such, simply on the basis of the barest of demographic considerations the needs of the Aboriginal peoples in the Basin Area, in the face of the suggested impacts of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, must be specifically considered.

Distribution patterns for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations of the Basin Area are also somewhat distinct and worthy of comment. It is suggested that “Indigenous people are far less likely to reside in large regional centers such as Albury and Queanbeyan and tend to be more widely scattered in smaller localities across the Basin [towns and localities with populations of less than 10,000 people]”².

With the socio-economic impacts of the Basin Plan predicted to be more acutely felt in the smaller, less resilient economies outside of regional centers - “towns with a population less than 25,000 people..... are [predicted to be] not sustainable in the longer term”³ - it would

¹ Aboriginal Affairs NSW; *Two Ways together Report on Indicators 2009; 2010*; at p25

² Jackson.S, Moggridge.B. & Robinson.C.; *Effects of changes in water availability on Indigenous people of the Murray-Darling Basin; a scoping study*; A Report prepared by the CSIRO for the Murray-Darling Basin Authority; June 2010; at p 33

³ Rizza.A.; *The potential effects of changes to water allocation policy on financing the agricultural sector and businesses in the Murray Darling Basin*; Report to the Murray Darling Basin Authority; October 2010; at p6

appear that geographic distribution may also work against the Aboriginal communities of the Basin Area when it comes to the potential impacts of the Basin Plan.

Socio-Economic Considerations

It has been conservatively estimated that the Aboriginal population of working age in the Basin Area will increase by 44 per cent from 40,467 in 2001 to 58,260 in 2016. With such an increase 21,381 Aboriginal people of working age would need to be employed by 2016 to merely maintain the current employment rate; requiring the creation of a further 6,165 job opportunities from the 15,216 employed in 2001.

However, if the Commonwealth Government's aim of "closing the gap" is actually to be met, then 34,257 Aboriginal people would need to be employed in the Basin Area by 2016⁴. This in an area where the current employment rate for Aboriginal males and females across the Basin Area is 40% and 30% respectively; compared with 70% and 60% for non-Aboriginal males and females respectively.

The limited participation of Aboriginal people in the agricultural sector across the Basin Area, may be put forward as a limiting factor in regards to the socio-economic impact of the Basin Plan reforms⁵. However, failure to achieve parity participation in the Basin's key economic sector is perhaps more indicative of the current socio-economic disadvantage experienced by the Aboriginal population of the Basin Area. The levels of workforce participation in low skilled laboring positions across all industries supports this view; with 30% of the Aboriginal male workforce and 20% of the Aboriginal female workforce in such positions⁶.

Socio-economic vulnerability

With an increasing proportion of the Basin population, current levels of socio-economic disadvantage (including specific factors such as limited employment and education outcomes), and with cultural, familial and social ties to place and country that make it difficult to migrate from areas likely to be economically affected (and some acutely so), the Aboriginal population of the Basin Area would seem to be disproportionately vulnerable to the socio-economic impacts of the proposed Basin Plan reforms.

⁴ Jackson *et al*; Note 2; at p36

⁵ Aboriginal Affairs NSW; *Two Ways together Report on Indicators 2009; 2010*; at p80.

⁶ Aboriginal Affairs NSW; *Two Ways together Report on Indicators 2009; 2010*; at p80.

Employment and economic participation is destined to become increasingly difficult for Aboriginal peoples, as competition for opportunities intensifies, and when the predicted impacts of the Basin Plan's reforms on essential and community services, which are already under-accessed by Aboriginal peoples, are also considered it is not difficult to see the potential for the Cotton Catchment Communities CRC's prediction that the Basin Plan reforms will lead to *"increased concentration of disadvantaged Aboriginal people"*.

Yet despite such clear predictions it seems that little attention is being paid to the potential socio-economic implications of the Basin Plan for Aboriginal peoples of the Basin Area. The broader debate predominantly centres on the implications for irrigators, landowners and owners of allied businesses. Whilst discussion remains focused on these groups, Aboriginal communities will continue to be overlooked.

The Government in considering programs and strategies to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the Basin Plan, must direct special consideration and specific measures toward the current socio-economic disadvantage and vulnerability of the Aboriginal peoples and communities of the Basin Area.

A Role for Aboriginal Land Councils

The network of Local Aboriginal Land Councils and NSWALC, play a key role in providing employment and facilitating economic development across the NSW portion of the Basin Area. Recent amendments to the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (NSW)* require Local Aboriginal Land Councils to strategically maximise the use of their assets by developing Community, Land and Business Plans, which include objectives and strategies for the carrying out of business enterprise and the investment of assets. The Government must work in genuine partnership with this network to develop and deliver economic development measures to mitigate the potential socio-economic impacts of the Basin Plan on the Aboriginal peoples and communities of the Basin Area.

Should you require further information in regards to any issues that have been raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact the NSWALC Policy and Research Unit on 02 9689 4444.

Regards

Geoff Scott
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16.02.11