

16/12/10

Mr. Tony Windsor  
Chairman  
Murray Darling Basin Inquiry  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Act 2600

Submission No: .....	343
Date Received: .....	7/10/10
Secretary: .....	Sc

Dear Sir,

Find enclosed our submission to the Murray Darling Basis inquiry chaired by Mr Tony Windsor.

Trusting we can get a better outcome for the farmers.

Yours Sincerely

John McGrath

CC:

Mr Richard Anderson  
Mr. Anthony Couronpis

**MURRAY DARLING**

**BASIN INQUIRY**

**SUBMISSION TO**

**COMMITTEE SECRETARY**

**ON REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**

**P O BOX 6021**

**PARLIAMENT HOUSE**

**CANBERRA ACT 2600**

John McGrath

13/12/2010

The committee Secretary  
Standing Committee On  
Regional Australia  
PO Box 6012  
Parliament House  
Canberra 2600

Submission on Murray Darling Water Use  
By John Alexander McGrath  
Retired Farmer age 76yrs.

#### Credentials and Experience

Started farming age 20 with borrowed funds clearing forest and scrub land. During 1971 entered and won State competition for farms under \$100,000. The judges said the farm was an outstanding example of development in virgin country and over a relative short period a valuable asset relatively free of debt and been created from limited cash resources.

## My First Thoughts;

### **Murray Darling Water Use:**

With a future 50 million population as against a past 100 thousand there is NO way that the environment can be issued with the same amount of water.

Irrigation has with big projects done a lot of good for the environment, Snowy Mountain scheme, Dams Hume, Dartmouth, Eildon, to just name a few.

There is a need for some water to flow to the sea to reduce salt levels.

FIRSTLY; The 4 barrages that block the Murray from the sea need removing.

This will allow Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert, 2 artificial Lakes to revert to their natural low level with the tide flushing out the river mouth twice a day.

With these two lakes back to their normal size the saving of water to the environment would be over 1000 gigalitres a year.

Water also needs to be shut off from a lot of other fresh water lakes so that we can afford the water to keep other lakes full for recreation and fishing.

The shallow Meindee lakes could also be reduced by two thirds, a huge evaporation saving of water.

There is a need for more water storages like deep mountain dams on the Mitchell and McAllister rivers in east Gippsland. A reduction of the Gippsland lakes area would allow surplus water to be diverted back into the Murray system.

Ken Davison of the age has been writing for years of the benefit of bringing Tasmanian water to Melbourne. If this was done Thompson dam water could be diverted back to the Murray system.

We should not be dismantling irrigation and native forest harvesting. They are forever renewable industries.

We are now into iron ore and coal for our current high standard of living But these industries are NOT forever and they will in time be in decline.

Only 1% of Victorias' native forests are now harvested. This is a DISGRACE as only 5% are needed for tourist venues. If 95% were selectively logged water harvest over the timber catchment area would rise by 20%. Good forest management would reduce the heat of wildfires, save some wild life, reduce our overseas purchase of timber, and help people from getting lost, and provide thousand of jobs.

Its' been proven in W.A. that timber harvesting results in more water in the dams.

The worst thing to happen in southern Australia is bluegum timber plantations. Trees use a lot of water, creeks have dried up, and underground water levels are dropping.

This only happened because of a 100% up front tax deduction for management investment schemes. On the driest continent on earth subject to terrible droughts with wet years few and far between we need to plan our water use without the pressure of the 10% greenie vote affecting sound planned water solutions for the Murray Darling catchments.

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### **Irrigation Farmers**

The recent drought has devastated irrigation farms, some getting no water allocation for 2 years and 9% in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, together with dry land crops failing to finish due to the drought.

Farmers have been refused the Government interest subsidy being told they are not viable. On appeal stating with water and normal seasons they will be viable and with family help them will continue farming. The same result the Government refused the interest subsidy on the grounds, if you can get family help you don't need our help. No wonder some farmers have committed suicide.

### **Buying Water Allocations**

3/

Is a positive action as this will allow some farmers who have had a gutful of disappointment to get out with some dignity. Hopefully enough farmers will remain to use the infrastructure effectively.

4/

### **Build More Dams.**

There is a need to build more dams, deep water dams for clean Hydro electricity for low evaporation loss and flood mitigation. The Snowy scheme and the Tasmanian dams are examples of great jobs done well. Unfortunately the Greenies are hell bent on killing off all dam building.

Water in dams is like money in the bank, it can be used at a later date.

Floods are a huge cost that dams can help to mitigate.

Dams need to have excess capacity, only the Dartmouth has excess capacity.

Engineers need to look for suitable sites on the Lachlan, Macquarie, Namoi, Barwon, MacIntyre, Condamine, Marenao, Warego rivers. Letting flood waters run down the rivers into shallow lakes is a certain way to waste water.

5/

### **Evaporation Water Waste**

Lake Eyre is a good example of nature wasting water, it can go a long time without water, but when it fills it can all be lost to evaporation in 2 years.

6/

### **Environmental Flow**

The environmental flow lobby is asking for water to be taken off farmers so more can run down the river to the sea.

With this years floods that is unavoidable. We don't have the dams to collect the water so a fair lot will end up in the sea.

With normal drier years only a small quota needs to run into the sea to clear salt, after that they need to prove their case for extra environmental water.

7/

### **Natural Environment**

In the natural environment lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert were joined to the sea and only had fresh water when the river was in flood, so in drier years these lakes need returning to salt water, the sea.

8/

### **Trees**

The environmental trees box and red gum are very tough and can go long periods like 20 years with out flood water, existing on rainfall only.

They do suffer from too much water and die off when flooded for long periods. They also die from too much water bringing water tables with salt to the surface. I have also seen unhealthy red gums from insect attack. However a short time later they have completely recovered.

9/

### **Salty Water Tables.**

In many areas farmers have put in bores and with electric pumps have lowered the salty water tables, a great effort.

10/

### **Red Gum Forests**

The Barmah red gum forests now have more tree density than before settlement, they are in excellent order.

11/

### **Environmental Water**

So if the environmental lobby wants water for the environment they need to prove their case before valuable water is released for minor gains.

12/

### **Farmers And The Environment**

Farmers are always doing a lot for the environment, building dams, planting shelter belts all over the place. You only have to drive around to see all the good that's been done for the environment.

13/

### **Wrong People Having Too Much Say**

The wrong people are telling the Government what is supposedly wrong with the Murray Darling water basin and they are not saying what is good about it. They are green type people who want everything left natural, but we have not learnt to eat gum leaves yet.

14/

### **The Way To Get A Good Fair Result**

To get a good balanced understanding of what needs doing, you need to consult people with their feet on the ground living in the effected areas, who know the value of the water and know how it should be used. Shire and Council valuers know every area like the back of their hands, know the value of the water, know the value of the towns, they are the people to ask if the water needs to be used in a different way.

15/

### **What is Wrong**

My thoughts are that there is not a lot wrong except shortage of water in dry years, more dams, water schemes ect is the answer to that problem. There needs to be a reserve of water in dams so irrigation farmers always receive an allocation even if it is as low as 10%. No allocation fore two years and 9% for the third year is a heart breaking experience.

16/

### **Water Harvest**

We can't include this year it is so abnormally wet, in normal years improved pastures, farm dams, overgrown forests and timber plantations are keeping a huge amount of water out of the dams. The big item in Victoria and Southern NSW is over grown thick forests. These forests have thickened during my lifetime. When 20yrs old I spoke to an early settler Mr Alec Barr who used bullock teams to transport supplies on wagons from Portland to Casterton. He said" where the bulldozers are clearing thick forest at Dromburg today I used to hobble my bullocks and let them graze amongst the trees with grass". I asked what thickened the trees. He said" I don't know must have been the fires". He went on to say that they lit fires all through the middle of summer from horse back. Their stock would only graze on the last newest burn. However over the years my thoughts are there is another reason the forests have thickened in southern Australia, and that is rainfall containing air pollution stimulating forest growth. In some places over seas it is called acid rain. In Australia it is free fertilizer making crops, grass, forests all grow faster.

The end result is hotter forest fires and less water in the dams.

17/

### **Climate Change**

Of course there is climate change. The big question is; are we giving it a boost with air pollution? The worst possible change is ice age, everything dies in the cold areas. The best result is warmer conditions because a lot of the planet is on the cold side. Warmer means more evaporation, more rain, more potential to grow more food, more potential to cope with population explosion.

The sun reminds us of its power between winter and summer each year, it could be guilty of warming us up a little.

Earth quakes remind us that the earth is changing its shape all the time.

Volcano eruptions remind us of their power, a large eruption could alter climate.

I have studied rainfall records and the last 30 years for southern Australia goes close to matching a 30 year period starting 1872 at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We just don't have enough knowledge from 200 years of weather records.

I recently walked Cradle Mountain to Lake St.Clair. The distant mountain sides showed a lot of dead forest. I said to the university tour guide what killed the forest, he said "a long period of cold weather". Seemed to be out of step with global warming.

The CO2 everyone is concerned about at present is providing a stimulant in free fertilizer to all plants. Maybe it could be a concern in the future, I don't know.

18/ In conclusion I trust that we can continue to use our valuable water on a drought prone continent in a responsible way.

Signed

J.A.McGrath

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# Murray-Darling plan makes mockery of science



COMMENT by  
**JENNIFER MAROHASY**

**A**T the very bottom of the Murray Darling system are six large steel and concrete barriers blocking 90 per cent of the natural ebb and flow between Lake Alexandrina and the Southern Ocean.

To the north west of the largest of these barrages is Hindmarsh Island, a new golf course and housing estate with retirees encouraged to buy their piece of paradise on the edge of a fresh water lake.

The Lower Lakes were not always fresh. Before the barrages were built they filled with sea water during periods of drought but now enjoy continual flows of fresh water from the Hume and Dartmouth Dams.

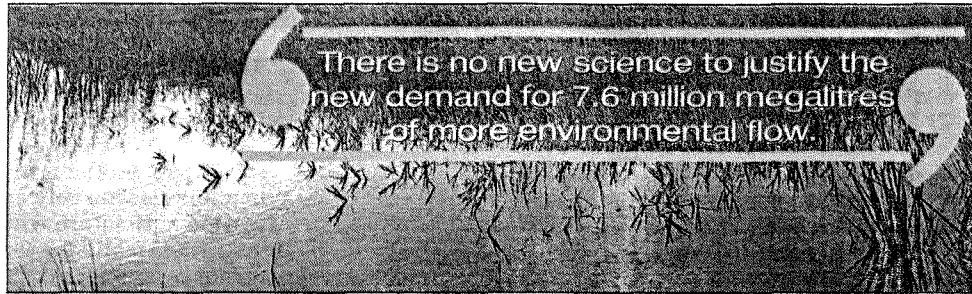
The Lower Lakes, Coorong and Murray Mouth will be the main recipient of all the proposed new environmental flows in the Murray Darling Basin Authority's (MDBA) controversial new Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan.

According to the 262-page guide, the equivalent of four Sydney Harbours of freshwater must be delivered to the Lower Lakes every year by taking water from irrigators as far away as the Namoi Valley in North West NSW.

When representatives of the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) visited the Namoi recently, 200 irrigators wore t-shirts with the slogan "Save the Murray: Remove the Barrages".

In response, the MDBA told the meeting there was no scientific evidence to support removing the barrages.

The MDBA apparently accepts the argu-



ment that before the development of upstream irrigation, Lake Alexandrina was always fresh but this is nonsense and ignores scientific studies published in the peer-reviewed literature, as well as accounts from early settlers and explorers.

An assessment of the paleoecology of the region by Peter Gell and Deborah Haynes details how the barrages have changed the ecology of the Lower Lakes and impacted on the adjacent Coorong (a long, sausage-shaped body of water that borders the sea).

In 1830, explorer Charles Sturt described the waters of Lake Alexandrina as initially "sweet" but by the morning of the second day, as they headed across the lake he noted the waters suddenly became salty and "unpalatable".

There is an argument, put to me recently by both Tim Flannery of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, and Greg Hunt, Shadow Minister for Climate Action, that if the barrages had not been in place during the recent drought, salt water would have penetrated an unnatural distance up the Murray River.

These opinion leaders seem to conveniently ignore that there was more water travelling down the river during this recent drought than in either 1914-15 or 1945-46, so there is no reason to suppose the intrusion would have been any worse than back then - before the completion of the Snowy Mountains scheme.

The bottomline is that the new guide is about taking water from our best food-producing farm land and sending it down to

the Lower Lakes which were never a totally fresh water system and are now degraded by European carp and new housing developments.

Not so many years ago Bob Brown, leader of the Australian Greens, was claiming that it had been "scientifically proven" that 1.5 million megalitres were needed to solve the problems of the Murray Darling Basin.

Since then at least one million megalitres have been bought back.

During the recent drought the river did not run dry, Adelaide did not run out of drinking water and the world's largest environmental flow release of 513,000 megalitres was made into the Barmah-Millewa forest. And during this past

year the basin has enjoyed flooding rains.

A reasonable person might conclude that we have finally got the balance right between irrigation and the environment, and along comes the new guide demanding even more water - ideally a whopping 15 Sydney Harbour equivalents be taken from irrigators.

The new plan makes a mockery of the word "science".

Indeed there is no new science to justify the new demand for 7.6 million megalitres of more environmental flow.

Furthermore, most of the water will be sent down to the Lower Lakes, a region that did suffer during the recent drought, and unnecessarily, because the barrages could have been opened and the area flooded with seawater as happened naturally during previous drought.

Indeed, if the MDBA was serious about improving the natural environment of the most stressed part of the system, it would remove the barrages now blocking the natural ebb and flow between the Lower Lakes and the Southern Ocean.

■ **Dr Jennifer Marohasy is a biologist, research scientist and commentator on environmental issues.**

# Murray's problems are not just upstream

**T**he Murray-Darling Basin Authority's draft basin plan is all about outflows. It aims to increase the Murray River's outflows by as much as 100 per cent as a way of keeping the river's mouth open.

However, the plan ignores inflows, specifically the ageing structures called barrages, just above the mouth, that shut the Murray off from the ocean.

Only by removing them can we guarantee the Murray mouth remains open. This would convert two artificial freshwater lakes back to a functioning estuary and save up to 1000 gigalitres (two Sydney Harbours) of evaporation each year.

With new pipelines, existing irrigated farms can be maintained, and the water saved from evaporation used to improve South Australia's water security. Alternatively, savings could be used for environmental purposes –

reducing the need for irrigation cutbacks elsewhere.

The Murray's muzzle is part of our history – five barrages built in the 1930s to turn lakes Albert and Alexandrina into freshwater ones.

The barrages are a chain of earthen causeways, concrete slabs, steel radial gates and timber structures totalling 7.6 kilometres that effectively block the Murray Mouth from the ocean. Thanks to these man-made structures our largest river has lost 93 per cent of its natural estuarine environment.

The barrages enabled water administrators to back up fresh water through the lakes and lower reaches of the Murray. They could control the height of the river; about 270 kilometres of the lower Murray and 75,000 hectares of lakes are under their influence.

During the recent severe drought, failure to keep the Murray Mouth open became a major issue in this country. The Murray Mouth

is integral to the function of the Coorong and two adjoining lakes, Alexandrina and Albert, known as the Lower Lakes. Together, the lakes and the Coorong are a listed by the international Ramsar convention on wetlands, one of 65 sites in Australia that have been listed and protected due to their environmental significance.

Calculations indicate the volume of tidal water that flowed into the Lower Lakes, before the construction of the barrages, was integral to maintaining the opening to the ocean. With a cumulative twice-daily tidal flow, the amount of ocean water no longer passing through the Murray Mouth dwarfs the latest proposal to push more freshwater through the mouth.

Australia experienced a number of severe droughts in the 200 years since European settlement, but before construction of the barrages, the Murray Mouth did not close. To single out water

diversions as the cause of its closure ignores the fact that river flows before storage development would have been just as low – zero.

The single most important change in the hydrology of the Murray Mouth is not upstream flows but the construction of the barrages. Massive reduction in tidal flows has deprived our great river system of the natural twice-daily water exchange that is a requirement of any healthy river.

The barrages have had a much more significant impact than contributing to the closing of the Murray Mouth. Instead of a gradient of saline through to fresh waters found in a natural estuary, the Murray has now a smaller and dysfunctional estuary, the Coorong, and an abrupt change to an artificial and dysfunctional freshwater body being the lakes and the lower reaches of the river.

The *River Murray Barrages and Environmental Flows* report,

published in 2000 by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, provides a litany of environmental failures. Constant water levels in the lakes have reduced habitat and wading bird numbers, and evaporation is as much as 1000 gigalitres a year. The reduced estuarine area has reduced natural fish numbers. Lake shorelines are eroding, contributing to increased turbidity, which has decreased sunlight for aquatic plant growth.

Environmentalists and probably many scientists will argue that extra outflows are still required for other reasons, such as salt export. But given the plan has ignored consideration of relocating the barrages, it has failed to provide adequate discussion about the total additional benefits of outflows. Clearly this is a discussion the community needs to have.

David Bryant heads Rural Funds Management.

# 'Natural' river a dream

COMMENT  
by JOHN COX

UNDER anticipated average rainfall conditions across the Murray-Darling basin, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's proposal will take a minimum of 3000 gegalitres from irrigators, of which 1000GL will be added to the 14,000GL already being used by the environment within the basin and an additional 2000GL will be added to the 5000GL already flowing into the sea.

Irrigators just cannot see how basin sustainability is significantly improved by cutting their total basin allocations to 8000GL so as to allow 7000GL to flow down the River Murray canal, without overflowing its banks, and out of the Murray mouth.

The holy grail of the basin guide, and also of the Wentworth Group, is that end-of-system flows improve sustainability.

This may be the case for some rivers but the River Murray has been a working river for more than 80 years and it is nonsense to try to return it to a natural river. A cost-benefit analysis of this policy would surely show this.

Even though there have been flows of less than 1000GL into the Lower Lakes since 2003 and very little flow into the sea, there has been no problem with salinity along the Murray, even for drinking water for Adelaide being pumped from Mannum.

Moreover, the Coorong will not be a beneficiary of any further end-of-system flows as this is a closed backwater and any additional water will flow straight out of the mouth.

Most irrigators living along the Murray have not noticed very much difference in the environment along the river during the drought.

The Australian environment is harder than we give it credit for as it has adapted to droughts and flooding rains over its evolutionary history.

There have been many stressed

Most irrigators living along, the Murray have not noticed very much difference in the environment along the river during the drought.

river red gums along the river during the drought but a Forests NSW report indicated that while about 50 to 70 per cent of gums in NSW were stressed, there was no reduction in forest area of 401,000 hectares and there was only a 1 per cent tree mortality rate.

The recent flooding of the Barmah-Millewa forests will bring these red gums back pretty quickly. Irrigated agricultural crops do not have this same resistance to droughts and flooding rains and there has been "a devastating impact" here.

The drought in the Murray-Darling basin decreased the irrigated

area by half between 2005-06 and 2007-08, some 700,000 ha.

The other major failing of this report, and all of the Wentworth Group analyses, is that there has been no scientific analysis of how the present 19,000 gegalitres of water used by the environment could be more efficiently used to achieve the same environmental outcomes as a cut in irrigation diversions.

Irrigators have improved their efficiency of water use by more than 15 per cent in these drought years.

If environmentalists could do the same then 3000GL of the present environmental use of 19,000GL would be saved and no irrigation cuts would be needed.

Most public opinion polls find that people give a weighting of about 60 per cent to economic outcomes and about 10 to 15 per cent each for health, social and environmental outcomes.

The guide, in stressing environmental outcomes at the expense of these others, therefore runs counter to what most electorates around Australia want from their government.

Australia has always been a land of the fair go and it is patently unfair for communities in the Murray-Darling basin to have their wellbeing threatened by a charter which places environmental outcomes ahead of all the other economic, social and health outcomes that people in all other parts of the country take as granted.

Hopefully residents in metropolitan areas will support their rural cousins in achieving this fair go.

■ John Cox is a citrus grower from Walkerie in South Australia.

WEEKLY TIMES 26-10-2010

WEEKLY TIMES 26-10-2010

# People power can beat rivers plan



Local communities have the power to challenge the anti-farm, anti-social, city-centric policies behind the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, writes ANTHONY HOGAN

IN the face of significant threat, the rage being witnessed across Basin communities is testament to the fact we are uniquely bound to each other and the world we live in.

We are dependent on one another and the environment for our livelihoods and wellbeing.

Any proposal to damage this sensitive relationship will be fiercely resisted.

In the cities, it is easier to get away with economic utilitarianist policies because

the damage is more readily hidden.

But you can't hide these things in the country.

We are ever conscious of our inter-dependence.

The problem with the current policy process is not new.

The social aspects of Australian government policy have constantly played second fiddle to a certain economic determinism dominant in Canberra.

Central economists, as we know, have been after small

farmers for years and the Basin crisis was just what was needed to justify the severe kinds of economic rationalism they have wanted to implement.

The problem is the Murray-Darling Basin Plan was published without a social implementation plan to document how rural livelihoods would be protected while we protect the river system.

And while I welcome the call for a human impact study, we need to note that it is not good

enough that this inquiry occur after the horse has bolted.

There are several ways rural communities can encourage community-centric policies.

The community, through local government, for example, can come together and participate in decision-making.

Commonwealth policy-makers are just one stakeholder among many at the table.

The community has the resources to commission the necessary research to inform

their decisions and implement a transition plan to move towards a new platform of sustainability.

There are billions of dollars allocated to the implementation of the Basin Plan; let's use a few million to put in proper processes to address the concerns of Basin communities.

● Dr Anthony Hogan is deputy director of the National Institute for Rural and Regional Australia at the Australian National University.

## There is a better way to save the Murray

**T**HE Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) was not completely surprised to hear of the resignation of Mike Taylor as chair of the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) earlier in the week.

Mr Taylor had acted with integrity as head of the MDBA but had been frustrated by failings in the Water Act 2007 which prevented the Authority from completing a comprehensive river management plan.

In stepping down from his position as chair of the MDBA, Mike Taylor has acknowledged what farming groups, including the VFF, have been saying for months; the MDBA is incapable of completing a plan that balances the needs of farmers, rural communities and the environment under their current mandate.



### AS I SEE IT by ANDREW BROAD

Mr Taylor is correct in calling for a reconsideration of the process currently in place.

The Federal Government must re-engage stakeholders, communities and the states to overhaul the process and better reflect the feedback being passed on at community consultations.

A significant area which must be revisited is the potential to address environmental issues in the Basin by prioritising water saving infrastructure.

The VFF, with analysis from the Victorian Department of Sustainability and the Environment, has identified at least three opportunities to pursue infrastructure works.

These include potentially significant water saving projects at Lindsay Island wetlands, the Hattah Lakes and the Gunbower Forest.

Surely, as a country renowned for our innovative nature, a better way can be found to achieve balanced outcomes.

Farmers are calling on the Federal Government to take the advice of their most senior Basin bureaucrat and reconsider the next phase of the Basin Plan process.

Steps must be taken now to ensure balance is restored to the preparation of the Plan and that the government's own

objective – healthy rivers, strong communities, and continued food production – is achieved on the most equitable basis.



■ Andrew Broad is president of the Victorian Farmers Federation

STOCK &amp; LAND, November

## VFF welcomes Stage 2 water savings move

**T**HE Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) welcomed the recent announcement that the State and Federal Governments will partner with irrigators to deliver Stage 2 of Victoria's Food Bowl Modernisation project.

The business case for the investment stated that Stage 2 would deliver approximately 100 gegalitres in water savings with the sharing arrangement to split 100GL for farmers and the remaining 100GL for the environment.

This will mean that by the time both Stage 1 and 2 of the Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project are completed, which is scheduled to occur by 2017/18, water savings will be expected to total an average of 25GL per year.

The Stage 2 project will include a connections program, aimed at consolidating connections and ensuring as many farmers as possible are



### AS I SEE IT by ANDREW BROAD

connected directly to the backbone; improvements to the backbone system, aimed at enabling more accurate, real time flow measurement, reducing water ordering times and allowing water to be delivered without irrigators having to manually operate their on-farm meters; and a number of smaller water savings and environmental projects.

The VFF has lobbied for this additional investment since the original commitment to Stage 1 was made. I met with Federal Water Minister Tony Burke as recently as last month to

reinforce the importance of this project.

As it stands the Goulburn-Murray Irrigation District loses on average 800 billion litres of water through evaporation, seepage, leakage and system inefficiencies. The VFF has always maintained that water savings within the nation's food bowl should be made primarily through infrastructure improvements.

At a time when farmers' confidence in government to protect their rights to water entitlements is at a low ebb, it is important that this announcement has underlined that savings can be achieved through infrastructure investments.

The same principle should be applied across the Murray-Darling Basin. Farmers have found ways to do more with each drop, there are also ways to achieve better environmental outcomes with less water.

Access to irrigation water is the lifeblood of many small towns in Victoria's north. The VFF welcomes this commitment by both the Federal and State Governments. We do question whether irrigators will be left to foot the bill for the State's \$106 million contribution towards the project.

After contributing \$100 million towards Stage 1 of the project, irrigators should not be held accountable for financing Stage 2. The State Government must stand up now and let northern irrigators know its plans on funding the second phase of the project.

The VFF has long called for further infrastructure upgrades to our irrigation systems. Farmers welcome the recent announcement and the savings it will deliver, especially to farming communities in Victoria's north.

■ Andrew Broad is VFF president

## Bank on basin's resilience

John Quiggin argues that taxpayers should buy 34 per cent of the water now used by Murray-Darling basin irrigators and add this to the 50 per cent of water that now flows for environmental purposes ("Billions down the drain", December 9).

However, the present wet spell has demonstrated the resilience of the river system, which is now in the process of a full recovery from the prolonged drought.

The Murray-Darling's natural state is one of alternating floods and trickles and the river often ran

totally dry before it became managed to allow modern agriculture.

The plants and animals associated with it have genetically engineered themselves to cope with vast changes in water availability, though nobody thinks we should return the river to this natural state.

Quiggin is correct in arguing it is cheaper to buy water than to undertake engineering measures to increase its flow to the sea.

But the Murray-Darling is a working river, and its basin supplies

40 per cent of the nation's agricultural output. Reducing the quantity of irrigation water must adversely affect the area's agricultural output.

We need to ask why should we unnecessarily marginalise rural communities by diminishing their agricultural income and replacing it with government handouts.

**Alan Moran**

Director deregulation unit  
Institute of Public Affairs  
Melbourne Vic

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# Water chief resigns

By COLIN BETTLES

FEDERAL Shadow Water Minister Barnaby Joyce has called on the Federal Government to release all legal advice it obtained on the Water Act 2007, following the resignation on Tuesday, of Murray Darling Basin Authority Chairman Mike Taylor.

In his resignation statement, Mr Taylor said he recently obtained further legal advice on the Water Act from the Australian Government Solicitor.

It appears this fresh legal evidence was the catalyst for Mr Taylor stepping down from the role.

The evidence may contradict advice obtained by the Water Minister Tony Burke in late October, from the same source, which he distributed in a ministerial statement to the House of Representatives.

At the time, Mr Burke said his advice from the Australian Government Solicitor made it clear that environmental, economic and social considerations were central to the Water Act and that the Basin Plan could "appropriately take these into account".

Mr Taylor's resignation letter said the authority's recent legal advice gave further confirmation that it "cannot compromise the minimum level of water required to restore the system's environment on social or economic grounds".

Mr Joyce said he had suspected for "quite some time" that what Mr Burke was saying

about his legal advice and the Water Act's reality, were "two different things".

He said Mr Taylor's resignation statement was from someone who was "absolutely frustrated and infuriated by the fact his minister is saying one thing when he knows the truth to be something entirely different".

He said Mr Burke must immediately table his legal advice, which says the Act can deliver a balanced outcome for the basin.

"It appears we have a ministerial statement that says one thing and from what we can ascertain, legal advice that says something completely different," he said.

Mr Joyce said environmental outcomes were regarded as being superior to social and economic outcomes for regional communities in the Act.

"If you go through the Act itself, it says quite specifically, the Minister must not advise the MDBA of changes based on socio and economic circumstances," he said.

Mr Joyce said if the Water Minister wanted to put the issue to bed, he needed to immediately instruct independent MP Tony Windsor to conduct a proper investigation of the Water Act's ambiguities and table all the legal advice he had received so far.

In commenting on Mr Taylor's resignation, Mr Burke said it had been known for some time that there was a difference of opinion between the Government and the authority over interpretation of the Water



■ Mike Taylor (pictured at the Griffith, NSW, community forum into proposed water reforms in October) has resigned as head of the Murray Darling Basin Authority. Photo: KATE GERAGHTY

Act, but the Government stood by its interpretation.

"We are determined to optimise all three outcomes; healthy rivers, strong communities, and continued food production," he said.

Mr Burke said no decision on a replacement chairman had been made.

The Victorian Farmers Federation president Andrew Broad said Mr Taylor had acted with integrity as head of the MDBA.

He said Mr Taylor had been frustrated by failings in the Water Act 2007, which prevented the authority from completing a comprehen-

sive river management plan.

"In stepping down from his position as chair of the MDBA Mike Taylor has acknowledged what farming groups, including the VFF, have been saying for months - the MDBA is incapable of completing a plan that balances the needs of farmers, rural communities and the environment under their current mandate," he said.

"The Federal Government must re-engage stakeholders, communities and the states to overhaul the process and better reflect the feedback being passed on at community consultations."

## PM strives for basin balance

PRIME Minister Julia Gillard weighed into the row over the resignation of Murray Darling Basin Authority Chairman Mike Taylor, saying the Government had the correct interpretation of the Water Act 2007 and not Mr Taylor, and would forge ahead with achieving a "triple bottom line win" with its water reforms.

Speaking to Rural Press exclusively on the same day Mr Taylor's resignation was first announced, Ms Gillard outlined Labor's commitment to delivering a balanced plan for managing the Murray Darling Basin.

Mr Taylor's view of the Water Act, which favoured environmental outcomes over social and economic factors, was the philosophical difference that forced his departure.

Asked who had the right interpretation of the Water Act, Ms Gillard said, "the Government's right".

She said to understand why it was best to gather a historical perspective.

The PM said the Water Act made its way through Parliament originally, when the Howard Government was in office and Malcolm Turnbull was Water Minister.

"We believe the Act is in the right form to optimise economic, environmental, social outcomes and we have legal advice to that effect," Ms Gillard said.

"The Water Act is in the right form to have the Murray Darling Basin Authority put together a plan that has an optimisation of social, environmental and economic outcomes."

Ms Gillard said people in rural areas would have plenty of time to have their say during the MDBA's consultation processes next year.

- COLIN BETTLES

# RECORD RAINS TO FLOOD LAKE EYRE, MURRAY-DARLING

ASA WAHLQUIST  
RURAL WRITER

THE record-breaking rains across central Australia and southwestern Queensland this week will send huge volumes of water into Lake Eyre and down the Murray-Darling river system.

The Bureau of Meteorology estimates that, over the 10-day period ending March 3, 403,000 billion litres of rain fell across the Northern Territory and Queensland — the biggest fall since April 1990.

Records have tumbled with the rain. The bureau reports rainfall of over 100mm across 1.7 per cent of Australia on March 1, and over 1.9 per cent of the country the following day, setting a record for a single day. The previous record was set on December 22, 1956.

The water is now flowing down through the many rivers and creeks of the upper Darling River catchment, setting records at towns and stations.

There is major flooding in the Diamantina, Barcoo and Cooper Creek catchments of the Lake Eyre basin. In the Darling River catchment, the Paroo, Warrego, Wallam and Mungallala Creeks, Maranoa, Balonne, Condamine, Moonie and Weir Rivers are all in flood.

Senior hydrologist with the bureau Hugh Bruist said the Queensland flows would produce "significant inflows into the Darling right the way through from Mungindi to Wilcannia over the next two to three months".

"I can't say what they will do with water in the Menindee Lakes, but you will see the continuation of good flows extending down to South Australia," he said.

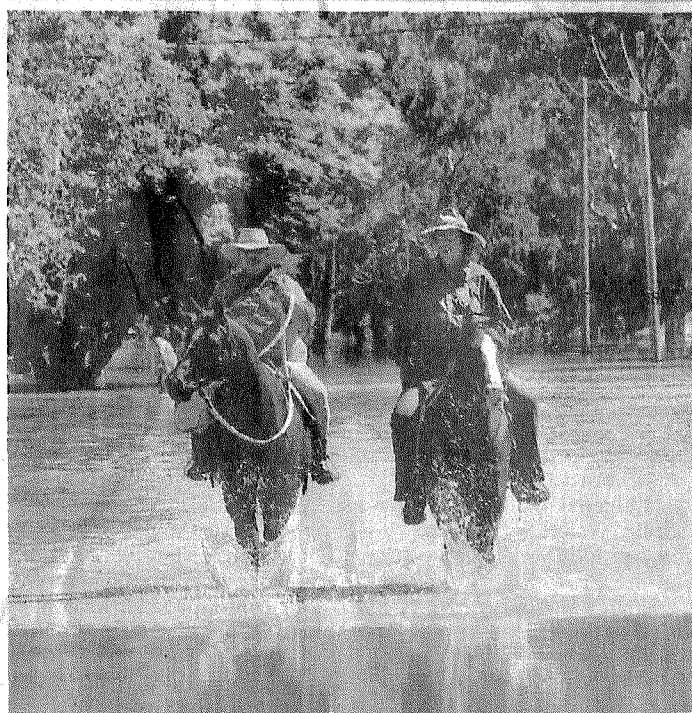
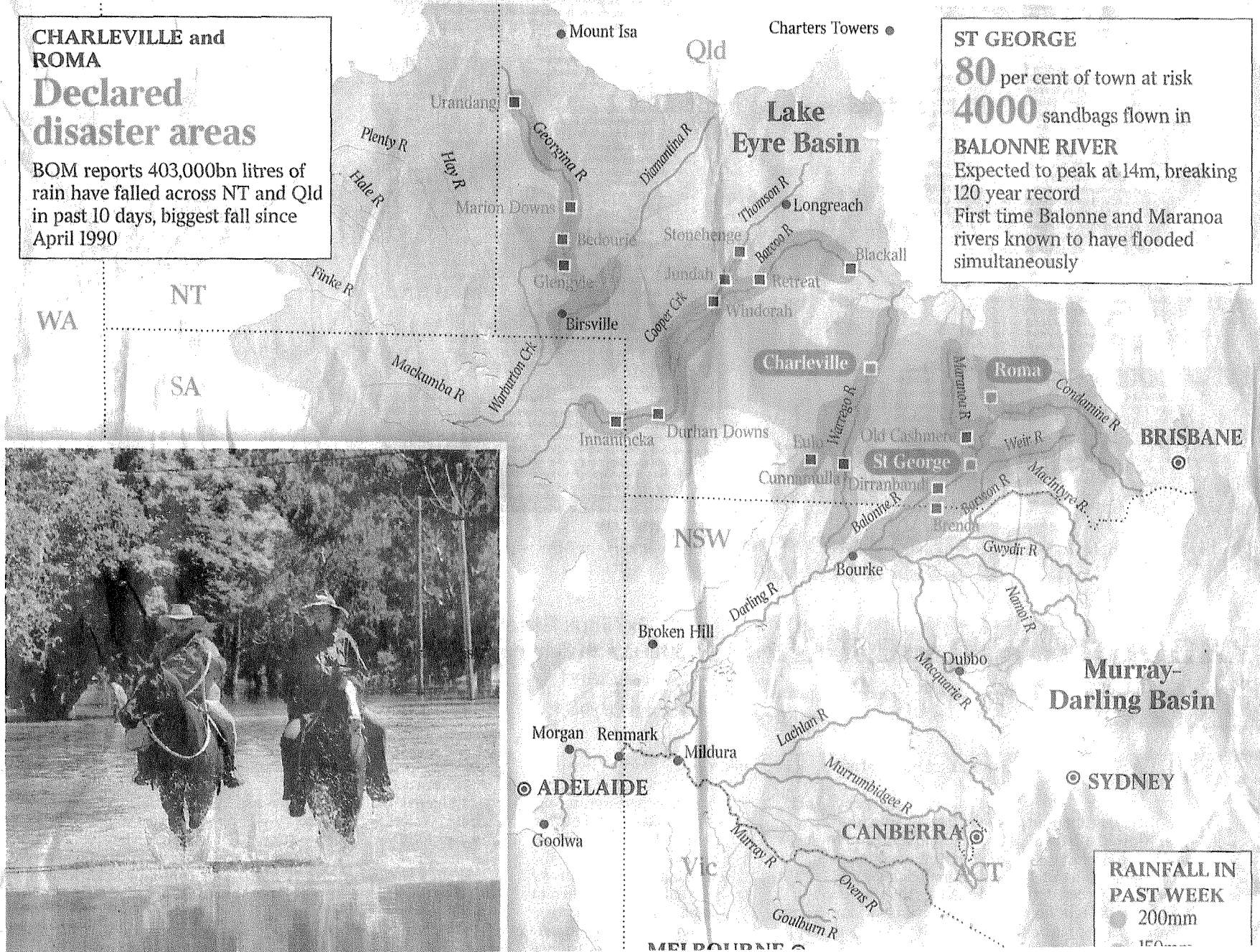
With much of the Darling catchment already wet with post-Christmas rains. Mr Bruist said

## MONSOONAL TROUGH ACROSS SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

**CHARLEVILLE and ROMA**  
**Declared disaster areas**

BOM reports 403,000bn litres of rain have fallen across NT and Qld in past 10 days, biggest fall since April 1990

**ST GEORGE**  
**80** per cent of town at risk  
**4000** sandbags flown in  
**BALONNE RIVER**  
Expected to peak at 14m, breaking 120 year record  
First time Balonne and Maranoa rivers known to have flooded simultaneously







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COI

# Water from Tasmanian hydro scheme

**B**OTH the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and the federal government have the wrong end of the stick in their clash over whether the environment should take precedence over the irrigation communities along the Murray River.

Leave aside the obvious fact that without a healthy river there can be no viable economy which is dependent on the river, the outgoing chairman of the authority, Mike Taylor, had no option under the law but to give the environment priority based on advice from the Commonwealth Solicitor-General.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard was in effect demanding that the authority should do something contrary to the Water Act and therefore act illegally. Taylor had no option except to



KENNETH DAVIDSON

**The Murray-Darling plan cannot work, so it's time to look at alternatives.**

resign. He announced last week that he had decided to leave his post at the end of January.

The authority's report to the government two months ago on the river's health, however, was useless because it didn't start from the beginning: all

rivers that die, do so from the mouth up. Any solution to the Murray's long-term viability must start by specifying the flow rate at the mouth of the river.

All the experts agree that the Murray needs 300-400 billion litres of water to flow through the lakes at the mouth of the river and out to sea. This determines how much water is required for environmental flows up the river.

Instead of doing this, the authority came up with a recommendation that 30 per cent of the water licences be bought.

The 3000-4000 billion litres of water licences would cost \$7 billion to \$9 billion based on previous purchases.

No government would pay this amount. Worse, in times of drought as we have experi-

enced over the past 13 years this would not produce a litre of water for the river. It is apparently not understood by anybody except the farmers that a licence does not guarantee an allocation of water for irrigation.

During the worst period of the long drought, allocations were often close to zero. Farms went broke, and families were broken. The survivors know that the licences of those forced off the land have mainly ended up in the hands of the banks and superannuation funds who will await the government's best offer during the next drought.

It is no wonder that irrigators were incandescent with rage at the various meetings set up by the basin authority in irrigation towns along the Murray or that no responsible

government ministers went to these meetings.

The central recommendation was mad. Why should the government buy back any licences when it has control over the allocations? The Wentworth group of environmental scientists and economic ration-

**€ New piping technology can be fully financed by private investment. ¶**

alists must bear some responsibility for this policy, which stems from their belief that the problems associated with water (including urban supplies) can be solved through setting up one big private market in water.

This is why everybody's water bills are rising dramatic-

# WATER & DEBATE

## could save the Murray

ally, even during a huge flood that is filling all the dams. Water prices have to rise in order to pay the capital cost of desalination plants up and down the east coast of Australia which are likely to be mothballed because they are too expensive to run.

The Victorian plant at Wonthaggi is the worst and most costly example because it is the biggest.

The new Baillieu government promised to release the contracts underpinning this gigantic white elephant. It is now the third week and no release.

What the river needs is real water on a constant basis that flows through to the mouth. This can only be achieved by closing down one major irrigation area centred on Mildura/Renmark, Griffith/Leeton or

Shepparton. Take your pick. It is clear that no government can do that and remain in office.

The current plan cannot work. The only alternative is to get a guaranteed 300-400 billion litres a year from outside the basin, because even though all the dams on the Murray are full and spilling, there are no possible large new dam sites capable of storing 3000 billion litres needed to keep the river running during a long drought.

Manufactured water or water from the tropics cannot supply environmental water because the delivery price is too high.

The only existing dams high enough to supply environmental flows of up to 400 billion litres a year, high enough to supply water to the Murray-Goulburn system

without pumping, are the Thomson and Upper Yarra dams, which supply 90 per cent of Melbourne's water.

This water for Melbourne can be replaced by water, fed by gravity, from north-west Tasmania after it has been used to generate electricity by Hydro Tasmania.

Recent developments in technology now mean it is more expensive to operate the desalination plant than pipe twice the guaranteed volume of water from Tasmania.

The new piping technology can be fully financed by private investment, it can generate additional income for Tasmania by selling water that now runs into Bass Strait, and save the Murray-Darling Basin.

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