

23rd October 2010

Mr Tony Windsor  
Member for New England  
TAMWORTH NSW 2340

**Submission Number: 53**  
**Date Received: 23/10/2010**

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**Re: Review of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB)**

Hi Tony,

I wish you well in achieving a reasonable consensus in your task of providing water for agriculture and the environment in the MDB while minimising impacts to local communities.

There is no doubt that less water will be available in the future for irrigation to provide more for the "environment". How this is decided is a vexed question!

Prior to my involvement in conservation farming I worked in irrigated crops, particularly cotton, in the MIA in the 60s, and northern NSW in the early 70s.

Bill Single (Regional Director of Research) and I were members of the Gwydir Valley Irrigation Development Committee in the early 70s to discuss the use of water from Copeton Dam. What an insight into Government incompetence. Those responsible for water licenses had little idea of either existing riparian rights, or new applications. Consequently, there was an over allocation. My guess is that this happened on most of the river systems in northern NSW and southern Qld..

The problem became more apparent as the area intensively irrigated expanded, and with a series of drought years.

What has not been stated in recent media reports is the impact that improvements in dry-land farming has made on soil water storage, water use efficiency, **and therefore less run-off.**

When we commenced work on conservation farming following efficiency (the % of rainfall stored as plant available soil moisture) was less than half what now is achieved by good farmers. Rotational grazing and maintaining better ground cover has had a similar effect in pastoral districts.

Another concern I have is the focus on climate-change. The latter has been occurring for as long as records exist, and evidence with ice cores etc.

What is much more important in the short term particularly for farmers, **is understanding climate variability.**

This includes any small influences that global warming might have, plus the wide variation that occurs within, and between seasons.

**An average season is the least common occurrence.** Most are wetter or drier, or hotter or colder, at some stage each year.

For example, the average annual rainfall (AAR) at Narrabri is 550 mm (22") at a site we were working at in the early 80s. In 1982 we had 11" of rain and in 1983 we had 33". Over the two years we achieved the AAR but did not grow a crop in either year.

Conservation farming, which basically focuses on improved management practices, has substantially raised productivity. Most of the farmers I have worked with have been **very** successful.

The message is good farmers survive at the expense of poor farmers. They expand their operations. Their increased inputs and production have a more positive effect in the area where they farm than do the poorer farmers.

Society should not be expected to subsidise unprofitable businesses, including farmers.

It is very difficult to identify and separate emotive opinions from rational and factual information to define the right path for a solution to a long-term complex problem. Polarisation of the debate is not helpful.

It is questionable having policies that subsidise inefficient farmers, particularly where their production is for the export market. However, this is too simplistic and impossible to determine where, and when, to draw the line between good and poor farmers.

I am confident your experience in agriculture, politics, economics, and a cool and rational approach to issues such as this, will enable you to make appropriate and balanced decisions.

Good luck in your deliberations and I am happy to share any agronomic experience I have on this issue.

Regards

Warwick Felton