Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

Question No: 125

Hearing: Additional Estimates

Outcome: Outcome 4

Programme: Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA)

Topic: Coorong

Hansard Page: N/A

Question Date: 23 February 2015

Question Type: Written

Senator Xenophon asked:

I refer to concerns raised with my office by the River Lakes and Coorong Action Group.

The Action Group has told me they are seeing system-wide ecosystem benefits from the release of more 327 gigalitres of The Living Murray (TLM) environmental water delivered in 2013-14, with more than 1000 gigalitres of TLM water over the life of the program. These benefits include a comeback of ruppia tuberosa in the Southern Coorong, a key indicator of health. However other indicators, like the larger wading birds, have not returned in numbers nor are they in good condition.

There is still concern among tourism operators, farmers and environmentalists that at this rate it will take more than ten years to get back to what was regarded as “normal” in 2002.

Around the Coorong and the Murray Mouth, water quality remains a key concern for farmers and for the environment. Perhaps most significantly, dredging of the Murray Mouth has already re-started.

1. Included in the Basin Plan is a statement that the Murray Mouth be kept open without pumping for 90% of the time, which equates to being open for 9 years out of 10.
a. Recently pumps were moved to the Murray Mouth and pumping commenced. What triggers are activated by this action to increase river flow to re-open the Murray Mouth?
b. What are the options available to increase this river flow?
2. Will the Murray Darling Basin Plan deliver sufficient water through spring to maintain water critical for recovery of a key plant Ruppia tuberosa in the Southern Lagoon?

Answer:

1.a. Dredging of the Murray Mouth recommenced in January 2015 when the progressive accumulation of sand, following a major flood in autumn 2011, had resulted in connectivity being less than the adopted targets. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority considers that without environmental water releases since spring 2013, the commencement of dredging would have been necessary before or during autumn 2014.

The commencement of dredging does not trigger action to increase flows to the sea. Rather, it is a response when all water available to flow to the sea has been unable to maintain adequate connectivity.

1.b. As the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (Basin Plan) moves towards full implementation further water will be recovered for environmental use. That water will be used both locally and at a whole of system scale to achieve basin-wide watering objectives, including increasing flows to the sea.

The implementation of the Constraints Management Strategy is expected to increase the frequency of higher flow events in the Murray River. Such flow events are needed to restore the health of floodplains throughout the system, but would also have an additional benefit of scouring sand at the Murray Mouth more often.

A combination of more short-duration higher flows to scour sand and long term base-flows to slow the ingress of sand is expected to reduce the need for future dredging.

2. With full implementation, it is anticipated that the Basin Plan will be able to deliver sufficient water through the spring/summer period to ensure the long term recovery of *Ruppia* in the Southern Lagoon. The Basin-wide Watering Strategy (2014) states that the expected outcomes of the Basin Plan include:

- A sustained and adequate population of *Ruppia tuberosa* in the South Lagoon, including:
  - by 2019, *R. tuberosa* to occur in at least 80 per cent of sites across at least a 50Km extent;
  - by 2029, the seed bank to be sufficient for the population to be resilient to major disturbances.

It is expected that the implementation of higher flows being considered under the Constraints Management Strategy could further enhance the ability to deliver these outcomes.

The ability to provide flows to support this outcome, in any particular year, will be a function of seasonal conditions, river flows, the available environmental water and current operational constraints.