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Inquiry into the Water Amendment (Saving the Goulburn and Murray Rivers) Bill 2008

Submission from:
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As an individual, residing in Mildura, I strongly support the Water Amendment Bill 2008. There are many reasons why this Bill should be passed but I wish to highlight only two significant and very simple reasons.

1. The over-allocation of water from the Murray Darling Basin.

This problem is now widely recognized but dealing with it will take many years and there is no clear way of knowing exactly how many. Therefore no further water should be taken from the basin until existing needs are met.

The Federal government did not recognize the seriousness of this problem until fairly recently. Senator Wong said in a media statement in 2008, “We’ve had years of neglect and over-allocation in the Murray Darling Basin”.¹ While there is now effort to address this, the outcomes are uncertain and difficult to quantify.

The National Water Initiative sets out the arrangements by which state and territory government water plans for catchments and aquifers should be developed, including making substantial progress in addressing over-allocation and over-use by 2010. On current trajectories, this objective is unlikely to be met without a significant intervention.²

This ‘significant intervention’ is not planned for at this stage. There has been no success at this stage of water sharing plans to set the pool of water available for consumption at

¹ Official website ALP - 14th July 2008

² Department of the Environment, Heritage, Water and the Arts website:
<http://www.environment.gov.au/water/mdb/overallocation.html>

sustainable levels. The seriousness of this is clear. This means that there is such uncertainty about future Basin sustainability that an immediate halt is needed on any plans to divert water outside any part of the Basin.

2. Water savings used to justify diversion are questionable and should be retained in the Basin.

There is confused and conflicting scientific and biological evidence that water efficiencies actually translate to water savings. It would seem logical that piping water rather than using an open channel would save on evaporation losses and free up more water. The functioning of ecosystems makes this a more complex arrangement than would seem to be the case to the layman. Water seepage to ground water can be essential to maintaining a healthy system. According to Daniel Connell and R. Quentin Grafton of the ANU, “The Murray-Darling is a low energy system with little capacity to purge itself of salts and sediments.”³ This has implications for the Victorian Government’s plan to divert water to Melbourne on the basis of savings made in the Goulburn area. Connell and Grafton go on to state, “improving water efficiency may, in some circumstances, reduce environmental flows. This is because water losses in irrigation include not only those attributable to transpiration and evaporation, but also water that would otherwise be returned to the hydrological system via seepage or other means (Productivity Commission 2006). Thus investments that increase water efficiency, but also reduce return flows, could potentially reduce environmental flows exacerbating the overuse of water in the Murray-Darling Basin.”⁴

Even to accept there will be some savings made in water use through increased efficiency it is important that these savings are all retained in the Basin. Sustainability depends on a huge and long-term increase in water flows, achievable only by retaining the maximum amount of water in the Basin as a whole.

There are other reasons why this Bill should be passed, such as the fact that the Goulburn River water diversion to Melbourne via the Sugarloaf Pipeline is in breach of the Intergovernmental Federal Murray-Darling Basin Reform. However the principle of maximizing water flow in the Basin should over-ride all other priorities.

Sincerely,
Judi Harris

³ *Planning for water security in the Murray-Darling Basin*, Daniel Connell and R. Quentin Grafton, Australian National University, Economics and Environment Network Working Paper, EEN0705, 9 August 2007

⁴ *Planning for water security in the Murray-Darling Basin*, Daniel Connell and R. Quentin Grafton, Australian National University, Economics and Environment Network Working Paper, EEN0705, 9 August 2007