



*AUSTRALIAN
FLOODPLAIN
ASSOCIATION*

**SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE
STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE
ENVIRONMENT,
COMMUNICATIONS,
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
AND THE ARTS – INQUIRY INTO
WATER BILL 2007**

BACKGROUND

The Australian Floodplain Association was established to link and assist landholders (mainly graziers and dry land farmers), and their communities, who depend on our rivers, floodplains and wetlands for their livelihood. The Australian Floodplain Association is an organization which represents floodplain and wetland landholders and their dependent communities. It represents groups such as The Paroo River Association, The Macquarie Environmental Landholders Association, Mid Darling Water Users association, Culgoa/Ballone Minor Water Users Association, Lower Balonne Floodplain association, The Coopers Creek Action Group.

The majority of Australian Floodplain Association members are from within the Murray-Darling Basin as this is where the greatest impacts of poor and inequitable water and river management are being experienced. The Australian Floodplain Association understands and strongly supports the environmental assets and values of our rivers, floodplains and wetlands as well as the sustainable economic potential all of which are now in peril.

The Australian Floodplain association strongly supports the general thrust of the proposed Bill because its intent is to provide greater equity in water sharing, giving appropriate recognition to ecological assets.

Issues for the Australian Floodplain Association

1. The majority of rivers in the Murray-Darling Basin are seriously over allocated.
2. Rivers include the main channels, riparian and floodplain areas and most of this is managed by floodplain graziers.
3. Floodplains below major developments are becoming seriously degraded, greatly affecting the livelihoods of floodplain graziers (fencing rivers, floodplain production reduced) and the ecology of our rivers (degraded floodplains and their plants and animals). The economic impact has never been recognized or compensated in regard to floodplain graziers, although there is compensation for the irrigation industry. This represents a transfer of wealth upstream on regulated rivers and an inequity for floodplain graziers. Of course, there is no compensation possible for the environmental degradation.
4. Floodplain graziers' requirements are similar if not the same as those of the environment in regard to water needs. Graziers are totally reliant on a healthy functioning river and floodplain system, as are ecosystems.
5. In decision-making, Governments need to recognise that graziers' livelihoods are dependent on river flows. Floodplain graziers remain the group most affected by development of rivers. They are arguably one of the major stakeholders on rivers.
6. Human intervention and river regulating infrastructure greatly exacerbates droughts on rivers. Even in this current severe drought, natural flows would have sufficiently

flooded floodplain areas to maintain their ecology. Landholders are used to living with the boom and busts of our continent and the floods and droughts and can implement management practices for it.

7. As the peak body the Australian Floodplain Association thinks innovatively about the future and how to solve current problems and tries to pre-empt future problems before they occur.

Response to Australian Government's Water Bill 2007

A. SUPPORT

The Australian Floodplain Association strongly supports the intent of the Water Bill

B. SPECIFIC COMMENT ON THE BILL

(i) The very short timeframe prevents a close analysis of the Bill but it appears to provide a sound mechanism by which floodplains and their dependent landholders and ecosystems would be better served than by present institutional arrangements.

(ii) An area of concern is Section 24(6) on Temporary Diversion Provision. This section says that a 5% variation to the long term average sustainable diversion limit can trigger a fresh determination of a temporary diversion provision. This may be a very low threshold for a highly variable system as the Murray Darling Basin where the 5% level could be exceeded many times, resulting in a constant call from high extractive users for fresh determinations of temporary diversion provision. This would perpetuate the problems currently experienced by floodplain graziers and river ecosystems.

(iii) The Bill appears not to provide for any mechanism in S109 for the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder operating rules to interact with State water holders such as the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change. There needs to be coordination between States and the Commonwealth on this issue.

C. GENERAL COMMENT ON THE INTENT OF THE BILL

(i) Water Savings

Australian Floodplain Association position:

- All water savings achieved through tax payer funded initiatives should be available for stressed river environments and not for increased water security until river environments and properties of floodplain graziers are no longer stressed by overallocation.
- The proposed water savings policy provides a further subsidy to irrigated agriculture. Already major subsidies to the irrigated agricultural sector but negative subsidies for floodplain graziers.

- There should be efficiency gains by appropriate pricing of water, reflecting the true cost of water in terms of infrastructure development, maintenance and supply. This includes metering and improved irrigation technology. Water use efficiencies will be further improved by appropriate costing of water.

(ii) Licence buy-back

Australian Floodplain Association position:

- Buy back of licences should only be for improving stressed rivers and providing environmental flows
- The AFA supports buy-back including compulsory buy back if necessary.
- There should be a key strategy for buy back

(iii) Metering

Australian Floodplain Association position:

- All diversions should be metered (stock and domestic, floodplain harvesting, industry, town)
- Compliance is critical ; penalties should apply for water theft
- Rain rejections should count against irrigation accounts
- Costs of meters should be totally borne by user

(iv) MDB Cap

Australian Floodplain Association position:

- All floodplain structures need to be assessed under cap, removed or licenced depending on their impact on diverting river flows
- Support a revised cap (must be downwards to reflect over allocation and extraction)
- Need for at least two thirds of flow for a healthy working river – should be used as a minimum target. Should be a target for rivers. Levels of 93/94 may be too high or inappropriate.
- The cap must be applied not just to the main channel but also to floodplains (floodplain harvesting and development)