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Environment and Communications Legislation Committee
Department of the Senate
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26th February 2019

Re: Water Amendment (Purchase Limit Repeal) Bill 2019

The National Parks Association NSW (NPA) welcomes this Bill to repeal the cap on water buy-backs under the Murray Darling Basin Plan and strongly supports its intent.

Established in 1957, NPA is a community-based organisation dedicated to the protection and conservation of nature. Over this time NPA has actively promoted evidence based natural resource management.

Accordingly, NPA welcomed the bi-partisan support for the Water Act in 2007, with provision for a Murray Darling Basin Plan to restore the health of the basin, underpinned by a substantial allocation of public funds.

As the Plan was rolled out the need to cut back on the now huge volumes of water extraction in the Murray Darling Basin was recognised as essential if the river, wetland and floodplain system as a whole is to continue to function. NPA takes a particular interest in protected areas such as the Ramsar listed Macquarie Marshes, the Gwydir wetlands, and the Narran Lakes, recognising the viability of these areas depends on the good management of the system as a whole.

One of the simplest measures proposed, the water buy-back option, always voluntary and open to willing sellers, has been recognised as effective and good value. This is substantiated in recent reports (ie The Productivity Commission, the SA Royal Commission Murray-Darling Basin report, and the Academy of Sciences Investigation of the causes of the mass fish kills in the Menindee region NSW over the summer of 2018-2019). It is perhaps not surprising that no specific reference is made to buy back in the interim report on fish kills commissioned by the Government, since this option was specifically ruled out under the regrettable capping decision referred to in the second reading speech for this current bill.

NPA draws attention to the availability of funding to assist regional communities to adjust to changes arising from the Basin Plan. Unfortunately, to date, most of the attention and funding has focussed on adverse effects and in providing carrots for improved 'irrigation efficiency'. It should be noted that many of the projects proposed to offset recent further reductions in the Sustainable Development Limit (SDLs) are ill-substantiated, and may even have adverse consequences for basin health, such as increased drying out of the landscape due to sealing/piping irrigation channels. More attention should be given to the positive benefits of maintaining a healthy river system – for the communities within the basin and beyond, and particularly for the first nation peoples whose wellbeing is vitally connected to their country.

Yours sincerely

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