

Submission to Australian Senate Inquiry into the integrity of the water market in the Murray-Darling Basin.

from Brian Phillip John Stevens

(ex-secretary Darling River Action Group)

Two terms of reference are addressed.

a. the allegations of theft and corruption in the management of water resources in the Murray-Darling Basin,

The proposed water pipeline from the Murray River to Broken Hill is another example of large-scale corruption, condoned by the New South Wales Government. Since the 1960s Broken Hill's water supply has been guaranteed by the pipeline from the Darling River adjacent to Menindee Lakes. In the last two decades this supply has become uncertain due to over-extraction of water by cotton irrigators upstream. Instead of stopping the over-extraction, the NSW Government proposes piping water from the Murray River at an initial cost of \$500 million, to be paid by the taxpayers of NSW. The benefits of this pipeline go exclusively to the upstream cotton farmers, including major water thieves. But the cotton farmers will pay none of the cost of the pipeline. The reason that I say that the cotton farmers will benefit, is that it will no longer be essential for water to reach Menindee Lakes in order to supply Broken Hill. This will also produce major environmental problems; the Menindee Lakes have been a refuge during drought times in an age when other refuges have been destroyed. The proposed pipeline should be abandoned and upstream over-extraction prevented.

d. the use of Commonwealth-owned environmental water for irrigation purposes, and the impact on Basin communities and the environment,

The Basin Plan was a complete failure for the Darling River, from an environmental point of view. There are no shepherding rules for environmental water to pass down tributaries into the Darling River. Irrigators are permitted to pump when river heights rise. When a slug of environmental water passes through, the river rises and pumping begins. At present this can only be stopped when the NSW Water Minister places an embargo on pumping. Any National Party Minister will represent a rural electorate with substantial irrigation businesses. As a result, such embargos will be very rare, and embargo breaches not prosecuted, as we have seen. The NSW Water Minister should not represent a rural electorate, and not be tempted by conflict of interest. The Basin Plan must be modified to guarantee shepherding of environmental water.