



Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder - Opening Statement – Additional Estimates 6 March 2020

Good morning. Thank you for this opportunity to make an opening statement.

As the Committee would be aware there are many issues running in the media on environmental water management and use.

With communities and the environment under enormous stress from drought, misinformation continues to fuel community concern. This is increasing anxiety and polarising stressed communities.

As part of my continuing effort to supply factual information to communities and the wider public on environmental water management and use, I would like to place on the record some facts about three matters:

1. Information about recent rainfall and flows into Narran Lakes.
2. Information about the photographs of dead red gums raised by Senator Patrick at the last Senate Estimates hearing; and
3. Science related to claims that red gum forests are being overwatered.

With respect to Narran Lakes

- Many Senators will have noted the rainfall around St George over the last few weeks – a welcome relief for communities and the environment.
- We are now seeing water flowing into Narran Lakes - an internationally recognised wetland located in north-western New South Wales near Lightning Ridge.
- Narran Lakes has recorded some of the largest gatherings of waterbirds in Australia—200,000 in 1983 and over 100,000 in 2011. It is also an important cultural site for local First Nations peoples.
- Around 100 gigalitres is expected to make it to Narran Lakes from three sources—water protected under Queensland water sharing plans, the Commonwealth’s permanent water licences including overland flow licences, and our first pilot project implemented to secure top-up water on a temporary basis.
- This project will reimburse a private water licence holder for not pumping water they are legally entitled to – but instead leaving it in the river to flow down to the Narran Lakes.





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- This pilot project has now finished and has resulted in more water reaching thousands of hectares of stressed habitat in Narran Lakes.
- This successful pilot demonstrates one way we can top-up the Commonwealth's water to achieve important environmental outcomes at key sites in the Basin.
- The pilot is consistent with actions Queensland and the Commonwealth have agreed to under the *Intergovernmental Agreement on Implementing Water Reform in the Murray-Darling Basin*. It is important progress, and I am ecstatic about what we have achieved from the pilot project.
- As I speak, Narran Lakes is starting to receive water. The on-ground monitoring team are reporting animals are emerging from the dry lake bed, ~~waterbirds are gathering~~ and important bird-nesting plants are getting a much needed drink.

With respect to photographs of dead red gums provided by Senator Patrick

- We have sought expert advice from responsible land managers about the cause of the tree deaths shown in the photographs.
- The dead trees shown were killed by wildfire at Coppingers Swamp-Duck Lagoon in 2008 and around Moira Lake in 2005. Both fires killed large areas of river red gum forest, including many large mature trees.
- The photographs also show stands of river red gums in Millewa that died 60-80 years ago as a result of permanent inundation during the early days of river regulation before creeks were regulated to stop unseasonal flooding.
- These dead trees are in wetlands such as St Helena, Reed Beds, Black Swamp, White Swamp and Little Edward.
- I can confirm to the Committee that no mature stands of river red gums have been killed or negatively affected by environmental watering.
- More detailed information on these photos is contained in a letter to Senator Patrick which I have cc'd to the Committee chair.





With respect to overwatering of red gum forests

- Media commentary suggesting that water in the forest is unnatural because of the drought is factually inaccurate.
- The watering we have undertaken has been based on methodical planning, the best scientific evidence, a continual assessment of on-ground conditions, and consideration of our other operational needs.
- There are multiple lines of evidence that show environmental water is not causing damage in red gum forests and in fact that these flood dependent forests require water.
- These lines of evidence include:
 1. Scientific literature in a paper by Doody (CSIRO) and other authors, that demonstrates under current environmental watering regimes large areas of river red gum forests are showing signs of stress and are in poor health;
 2. A comparison of actual river flows through the forest with the modelled natural inflows that would have passed through the forests shows that red gum forests are getting a fraction of the water they would have under natural conditions prior to regulation of the river;
 3. NSW Forestry Commission red gum forest site quality maps clearly show a strong correlation between frequency of flooding and the quality, productivity and health of red gum forests; and
 4. On-ground monitoring, which clearly shows the stark difference in health between the good condition of those red gum sites receiving regular environmental flows, and the stressed condition of trees that now only receive water during big floods.
- In conclusion I can assure the Committee that red gum forests are not being overwatered with environmental water.

Thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement. My colleagues and I are happy to answer questions.



