

MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN RUINING THE EDWARD RIVER

RURAL AFFAIRS

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The Murray-Darling Basin Plan (MDBP), which has the goal of protecting the environment, is instead destroying it. But politicians and government authorities are not listening to those in the best position to know.

The Napier family has been farming along the Edward River in Southern Riverina since 1966. Today, father Rod and son Brett Napier have generations of experience on the land and they are concerned at the destruction of the river environment that they have observed is actually being caused by the plan supposedly designed to protect it.

The pair, who are very environmentally aware and realise that they have a duty to care for the environment for the sake of future generations, have been trying for more than two years to draw attention to the destruction of the river environment that they see before their eyes, but they say their pleas “fall on deaf ears”.

They continue to be frustrated by a lack of urgency to stop the damage, coupled with a reluctance to acknowledge its extent.

In September 2018, the Napiers wrote to executive director of river management Andrew Reynolds of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) about riverbank slumping in the Edward River upstream of Deniliquin.

The Edward River flows out of the Murray River to the southeast of Deniliquin, and meanders westwards across southern New South Wales to join the Wakool River, which then flows into the Murray to the southwest of Balranald.

Rod Napier said: “I own land alongside the Edward River downstream of the Barmah Choke and upstream of Deniliquin. For many years now (and in particular with the inception of larger volumes of environmental and consumptive requirements downstream), the level of bank erosion that has been



Here can be seen a tree that recently collapsed into the river (its foliage is still green).

occurring is of great concern environmentally.

“It is my understanding that the MDBA is aware of the issue, but no action has been taken.”

In response, Mr Reynolds said the MDBA “recognises that erosion occurs in rivers and streams under both natural and regulated conditions where water orders are in the system” and that “it is well known that erosion can be made worse by factors that are not flow related, such as changes to riverbank vegetation and by wash from boating”.

He referred to the impacts of flooding and said it is “not feasible for governments to construct works at all locations where erosion impacts adjacent landholdings”.

The Napiers responded, stating that there is no boating in this section of the river as it is “totally blocked off with fallen timber”, and that there had been massive erosion well before the 2016 flood event.

“The high-speed water events during the spring months are undermining the banks, hence the bank slumping and trees falling. We would like someone to come and look at this problem face to face with us,” they wrote.

“The bank slumping that is occurring is not due to natural flood events. Rather the continual rapid rise and drop from environmental flows is undermining banks causing slumping and trees falling in.

Rod Napier adds that trees that would otherwise handle intermittent flows are undercut, die and fall into the water and affect water quality.

“In the past black water events have also occurred, with aquatic species such as Murray crays, freshwater shrimp and yabbies exiting the river in search of oxygen,” he said.

But still authorities fail to act.

“The Basin Plan was supposedly developed to protect the environment, yet it is destroying our pristine stretch



In this photo the erosion of the bank of the Edward River can be clearly seen. This erosion results in large trees having their roots undercut, causing them to collapse into the river where they end up clogging up the waterway.

of the Edward River,” Rod said. “The destruction occurring in the Edward was brought to the attention of our state water department many years ago, but nothing happens.

“The MDBA is reluctant to admit there is a problem, and the NSW Government and its agencies will not get involved to fix it.

“I am even more concerned with the MDBA recently telling us that the damage to the Barmah Choke is caused by a sand slug. This seems to be part of its effort to convince the public that we need to dredge or bypass the choke, potentially causing even more damage in the Edward.

“This will come at a huge cost to taxpayers and will not fix the problem.”

Rod says the MDBA claim about the sand slug moving through the river system “is an attempt to distract

the public to prevent them from finding out the truth: that the river system is becoming clogged from bank slumping and tree vegetation falling in slowing the river flow”.

He explains that private property is being damaged along the Edward River. On their property, crossings on a topographical stream are constantly being washed away and have become blocked with fallen timber. As a result, there is no access to parts of the property in the event of fire. (A topographical stream is one that runs off a river and rejoins the river downstream.)

Rod is less concerned about the health of the 150 acres of redgum forest on his property, except for those along the actual river banks.

He does remark though, that he is concerned that the man-made floods aimed at keeping forests saturated

in dry years may damage the forest on his property. “This just promotes weed growth and soil saturation in red gum forests affecting red gum survival,” he said.

Rod says other landholders along the river are facing the same issue.

He says the MDBA needs to acknowledge that the flow regimes it is being forced by legislation (specifically, the *Water Act 2007*) to implement as part of the Basin Plan are damaging the environment and need to be reviewed.

“Our greatest fear is that the beautiful Edward River and its unique environment will be destroyed before anyone admits we’ve got this plan wrong and we need to fix it,” Rod said.

The months pass and the MDBA makes no contact with these concerned farmers.