

## **Jody Swirepik - Opening statement – Senate Estimates 25 October 2019**

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

When communities and the environment are under enormous pressure from drought - misinformation can lead to increased anxiety, anger and polarisation within already stretched communities.

As part of an ongoing effort by my office to supply factual information to inform communities, I would like to put a few facts on the record related to how we use our environmental water, how water is allocated to us, and what we can and can't do regarding loaning, gifting or trading water.

### **With regard to how we use our water and especially the recent spring flows in the Murray**

- I know people are concerned about how much water is going down the Murray at the moment. Most of this is not environmental water.
- Much of the water flowing through the mid Murray is for downstream communities and industry to use, not for the environment.
- Around 25% of all the water that has flowed downstream of Yarrawonga this water year is environmental water with the remaining 75% meeting irrigation and other downstream demands. The graphs which I will table to the committee show the proportion of environmental flows in the River Murray at Yarrawonga for the last five quarters.
- Environmental flows released into the Murray over winter and spring are the heartbeat of the river—they keep our native plants, fish and animals healthy. Without pulses of fresh water we see situations unfold like those in the Darling River and northern Basin.

### ***With regard to watering in the forest***

- While it is hard for some people to believe, media commentary suggesting that water in the forest is unnatural because of the drought is wrong.
- If there was no water extraction and no dams upstream, inflows this year would have resulted in at least three overbank flows through the forests over the last 4 months. This is because there has been reasonable rain and inflows from the Victorian tributaries to the Murray - which is also why Victoria has a greater amount of water available for allocation.
- The watering we have undertaken has been based on methodical planning, the best scientific evidence, a continual assessment of on ground conditions, and a practical approach to deliver our water around other operational needs.
- Last year much of our water could not be delivered without risking shortfall for other users so this year we have delivered water earlier based on the natural cues I mentioned. This has allowed us to finish our spring watering before the irrigation demand ramps up and means we are not in competition for channel capacity. The planning to achieve this is a deliberate and collaborative effort involving multiple agencies and community reference groups to get the best outcomes for the environment and respect other water users.
- Delivering our water overbank into the low-lying parts of the forest and the braided creek system significantly increases the environmental outcomes and lessens the pressure on the choke.
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- These flows pick up nutrients from the forest and transfer it into the river, driving the food web that feeds our iconic native fish like Golden Perch and Murray Cod.
- Flows through the forest have now receded to less than channel capacity. Small flows are still underway through some of the creeks in Millewa Forest to support Murray cod breeding.

**With regard to how water is allocated to us**

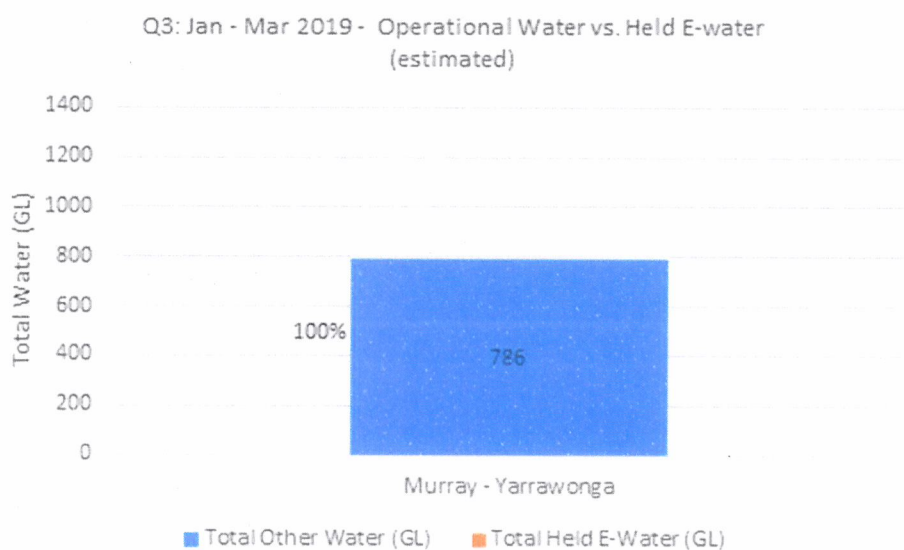
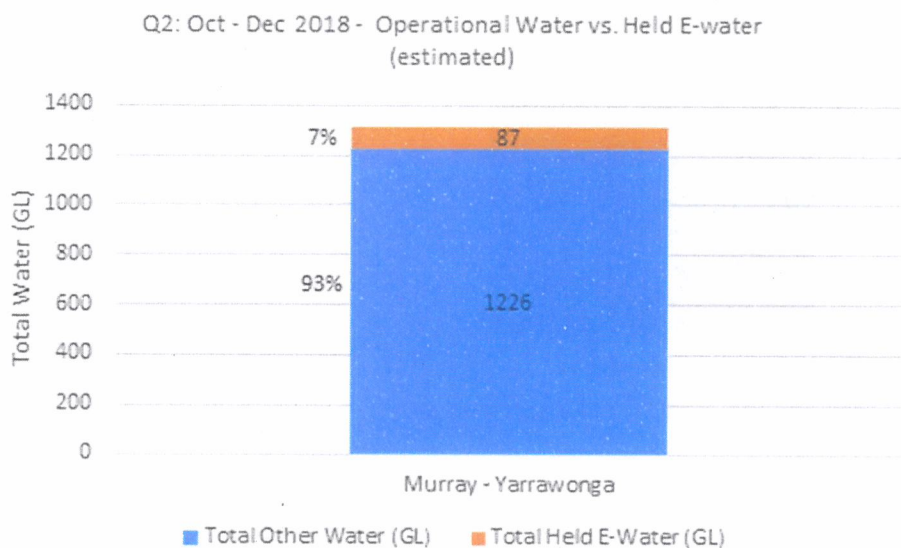
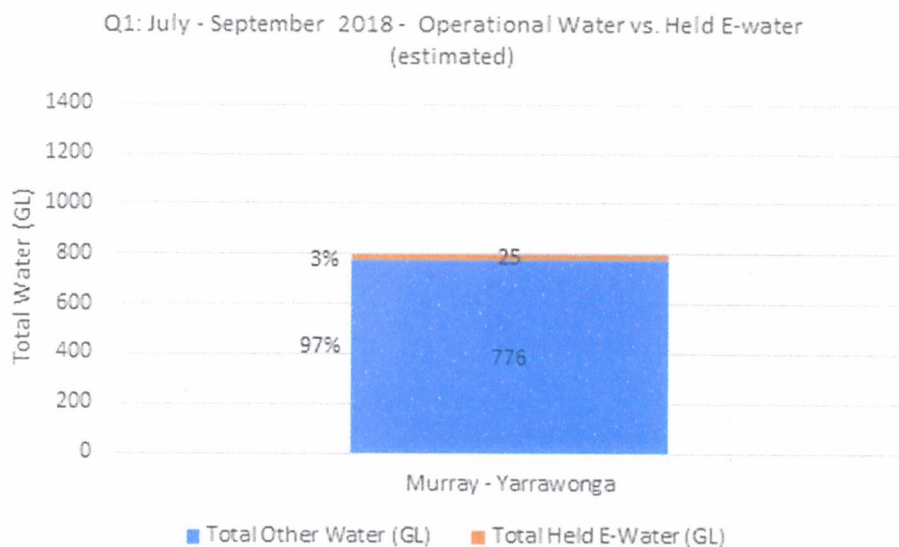
- Current environmental water use is having no impact on water allocations for drought affected farmers.
- Environmental water holders receive allocations on exactly the same basis as other entitlement holders – and in the NSW Murray we have also received zero allocations against general security entitlements.
- Like other water users we can carryover water to manage risk. We’ve done this in the Southern Basin to help protect the environment in the face of the drying conditions. Our carryover is fully committed to meeting environmental demands this year and next.
- Most of the water we are using in Murray is from carryover on Victorian water accounts and new allocations against on our Victorian entitlements. These allocations reflect where the rain has fallen across the Murray catchment.
- Low NSW allocations means only 6 per cent of our water this year is from the NSW Murray.

**With regard to loaning/Gifting/trading water**

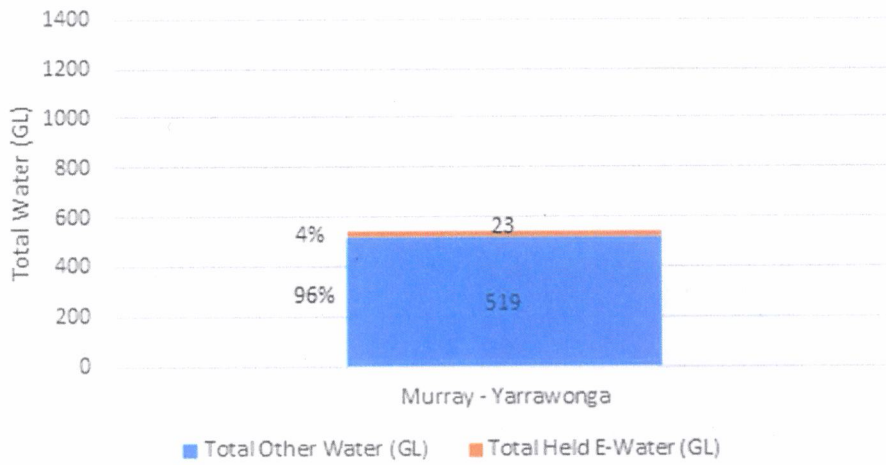
- I am aware of calls for making water for the environment available for irrigators.
- I can only consider trading water on the open market when it is not required for the environment – that clearly isn’t the case now. Under law I cannot give or lend water for the environment.
- We saw the terrible impacts during the Millennium drought when the Murray didn’t have enough water to run to its natural end point in the Coorong, and just last summer we saw fish deaths in the Lower Darling when there was insufficient river flow to reach the end of the Darling system.
- I have recently published a statement on lending, gifting or trading environmental water on the our website.
- I am happy to take any questions the Committee may have on this issue.

I’d like to thank the committee for the chance to make an opening statement. My colleagues and I would be happy to answer questions related to these matters.

**Attachment A:** Proportion of environmental water (all water holders) vs all other 'operational uses' water in the River Murray at Yarrawonga from July 2018 to Sept 2019



Q4: Apr - June 2019 - Operational Water vs. Held E-water (estimated)



Operational Water vs. Held E-water (estimated)  
1 July - 30 September 2019

