



River Lakes and Coorong Action Group Inc

ABN 23 590 559 324

Winner 2009 Jill Hudson Environmental Award

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THE SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the “Restoring our Rivers” Bill 2023.

The River, Lakes and Coorong Action Group is an independent community organisation, formed in 2006, with a record of more than 17 years advocacy for the health of the Murray Darling Basin system.

Based at the end of the system, we have witnessed, firsthand, the catastrophic devastation, both environmental and socio-economic, caused by overallocation with the super-imposed millennium drought. We have also noted the positive impacts of fresh water, particularly on the Southern Lagoon of the Coorong with the recent flood. Everything is connected and rivers die from the mouth up.

We are disheartened by the fact that, 11 years after the announcement of the Murray Darling Basin Plan, which, in itself, was a compromise, the Plan has not been delivered. This is particularly of concern as the current Plan did not consider climate change and the likely reduced inflows into the system. There is no doubt the system needs assured environmental water to prevent further fish kills, algal blooms and blackwater events. Look no further than Menindee for graphic confirmation of this fact.

We applaud the aims of this Bill – to deliver the Basin Plan in full, including 450 GL of “additional” environmental water. We consider this 450GL to be an integral part of the initial plan. The 450GL of environmental water benefits the whole system on its way to the

Lower Lakes and Coorong. Environmental flows were critical in keeping the water level in Lake Alexandrina above sea level in 2016 and keeping fishways open.

We support all options being available to deliver the 450GL with removal of all impediments to recovery by repealing the 1,500GL cap on Commonwealth Water purchases. It is well documented that buybacks, or water purchases, are the most effective and cost- efficient way of getting real water back into the system.

We also support the use of WESA funds to be used to enhance environmental outcomes.

Providing additional time for SDLAM projects should be on a project-by-project basis with clear, enforceable guidelines of completion times and rigorous auditing of how much real water has been saved. Our feeling is that time is marching on, and the system needs water if it is to survive. The last decade seems to have been wasted.

Basin states should be held to account to meet their SDL obligations. This should have been happening since 2012.

It is imperative that the Inspector – General has true independence and adequate resources to enforce deadlines and compliance with water extraction and operating rules.

Transparency and accountability are paramount with an emphasis on environmental and water quality outcomes in addition to volumetric measurement.

We are concerned about the state of the Menindee Lakes and Lower Darling and support a review of the proposed minimum reserve of 195GL, which seems inadequate to prevent environmental harm, further fish kills, or disperse algal blooms or blackwater events.

Regarding constraints, the message must be that managed environmental flows are not the same as damaging natural flood events. Managed minor inundation events must be allowed to sustain target sites. Resilience in times of drought depends on watering when there is availability of water.

We welcome the proposed measures aiming to restore transparency, integrity and confidence in the water market. Implementing a Standard of Conduct Code under the responsibility of the ACCC is long overdue. Monitoring compliance and taking enforcement action where necessary with comparable regulatory safeguards similar to stock agents, real estate agents and stockbrokers is needed to improve the current impression, deserved or not, of behaviour resembling “dodgy used car salesmen”.

Unfortunately, we live in a time of misinformation and scaremongering, where negativity rules. The questions that need to be addressed are

“What happens if we allow this Plan to fail?”

“What will the consequences be?”

There is still a chance to save the Murray -Darling but time is running out. It is time for positive action, a show of real respect for the Traditional Owners of this land and the wisdom shown in caring for this land and rivers for millennia and a true commitment to restoring a healthy Murray-Darling system for all.

We support this Bill.

Yours sincerely

Janette Brooks

Secretary, River, Lakes and Coorong Action Group