

***Submission to Senate ECA committee -
Water (Crisis Powers and Flood water Diversion) Bill 2010***

Issue:

Granting these extra powers to the MDBA, is **not** in the best interest of the MDBA Basin Plan. If enacted, this Bill would only further disadvantage many of the businesses & communities of areas including the Southern Riverina (part of the NSW Murray Valley) - where general security water is the predominant form of entitlement held by our regions' farmers. The two criteria of this Bill unduly favour South Australia, where; i) high security is more favoured & ii) the lower lakes are just one (albeit important) component of the Murray Darling Basin.

Dangerously, the exclusion of others - such as general security water users - from the consideration and wording of this Bill, makes this proposed Bill not just flawed - but further adds to parochial self-interest that may hinder sensible and balanced outcomes.



Approximate region defined as Southern Riverina (highlighted) - a region serviced by Murray Irrigation Ltd's irrigation supply network (as of March 2005) Southern Riverina includes the major towns of Jerilderie, Finley, Berrigan, Deniliquin, Moulamein, Moama, Mathoura and numerous communities such as; Wakool, Conargo, Blighty, Mayrung, Gulpa, Bunnaloo, Caldwell, Pretty Pine and Wanganella

Background:

From the background issue paper of this Bill, it appears that the reasons given for this measure - are out of a sense that expected flood waters from the Darling River Network, did not flow - as anticipated - to recharge the lower part of the system (i.e. Lake Alexandrina). It may go without saying - but for many areas of north western NSW - the return of the natural flood waters has provided an amazing reinvigoration of the long drought affected and vast flood plains, such as around Bourke (see [Landline of 30 May 2010¹](#)).

Undoubtedly, the Murray Darling basin has faced challenges over the last decade - that have effected all its residents. In my region of Southern Riverina of N.S.W. (see map on previous page) - this has seen unprecedented challenges for our local farmers, local businesses and communities. Like many regions, we faced a compounding problem of below average rainfalls & dramatic shortages of irrigation water. Our general allocations for seasons 2006/07 then 2007/08 were **0% of general security**, and it was only on 16 February of 2009 that a 9% general security allocation was announced for season 2008/09. For our region, that has meant that there has been 3 consecutive years of no effective summer irrigation whatsoever. Incidentally, also during this time, Southern Riverina irrigators - unlike farmers in our near neighbouring states - have had to pay **all** state water fixed charges.

Unfortunately, during this time many of our regions winter crops have - on the whole - either yielded poorly or failed completely. As a result - farmers have expended large amounts of capital *and* had to pay ongoing costs such as rates, power and - ironically - *water bills*; whilst having next-to-no farm income. Consequently, our regions business and communities that normally prosper as a result of the diversity and industry of our agriculture, have been economically stagnant.

Around Wakool , an area where there was once 15 family diary farms now there but three - a typical diary can employ a family with 2 or 3 additional shift / seasonal staff. Wakool, as a small community with a township of around 250, is reflective of what is happening across the Southern Riverina.

Deniliquin - one of Southern Riverina's most important service towns - has seen a crippling of our services and population, as dozens of working families have left the district as a result of the downturn in other agriculture industries such as : closure of the Deniliquin Rice Mill (300 staff lost), & Deniliquin Abattoir. Further losses in other professions such as nurses and teachers thence resulted. It is likely that the population of Deniliquin once stable around 8000 people is well below 7000.

Despite all these challenges the majority of this regions' farmers remain. As a local farmer whom has worked alongside my, now retiring, parents in establishing a highly water efficient vineyard (on a general security entitlement) and mixed irrigation farm, I am certain that a sensible and truly balanced Murray Darling Basin Plan remains our best means of restoring confidence to the future of farming *and* achieving sustainable environment outcomes.

Consequences:

If implemented this Bill, will compound the misnomer that the whole Murray River health is dependant on the state of the lower lakes. It is unfortunate that weighting of population distribution is creating perverse outcomes - Why is a pipeline allowed to extract water from the Murray Darling Basin to Melbourne? Would you be happy if you were a Goulburn Valley farmer (having endured the drought and record low allocations) - to see once productive water leave your district to cater for urban growth ***outside the Murray Darling Basin ... & for good?!!***

Also I believe that the population distribution of the Murray Darling favours a large minority that do not directly reside directly within the Basin, over the those that do: -

¹ ***'Bourke Battlers' by Reporter Tim Lee © ABC 2010.***

*“In 2006 there was 3.4 million people living or around the Basin that are directly reliant on Basin Water ... This includes 2.1 million that lived within the basin * and 1.3 million living around it, including Adelaide”²*

ABS figures reveal that 1,040,719 persons are usually resident in Adelaide (Urban Centre Localities). I find it difficult to reconcile that this represents 80% of those 1.3 million quoted above. Note also, that Melbourne now is effectively drawing water from the Murray Darling Basin - should they be included in the above statistic too?

Incidentally, also from the 2006 Census - there were 368,129 persons usually resident in Canberra-Queanbeyan (ACT/NSW), representing 17.5% of the population of the Murray Darling (equivalent to about 4 Federal Electorates). Whilst, in my Federal Electorate of Farrer geographically covering a quarter of the total Murray Darling Basin by area, must make do with one Federal House of Representatives Member. It goes without saying that for farmers, land managers and rural communities across the vast expanse of the predominantly agricultural electorate of Farrer - the land and water are not just part of the environment but are critical to their livelihoods.

Also for comparison, from the above census figures for Adelaide (all- by definition - living outside the Murray Darling Basin) are represented by an equivalent of 11 Federal Electorates.

As far as I can gather, much of the Murray Darling water crisis is political, with those living outside the basin acting as the 'tail that wags the dog'.

As an example, prior to the last S.A. State Election the Rann Government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on a further 'temporary' barrage across Lake Alexandrina. Also at this time prior to that election much of the policy had a religious (smokescreen) fervour in which upstream states were to blame for the decline in the Lower Lakes. In light of this, more moderate and articulated voices with constructive solutions found it difficult to compete against rogue politicians and parochial media that simplified the election to 'Save the Murray' bandwagons.

As a region whom has seen a large exodus of our population, we in the Southern Riverina are politically out-muscled by scaremongering in the media and by some (predominantly S.A) Politicians, that have sought to use the Murray River as a political football in which the more they can appear to be tough on upstream states. At the same time, they have deceived their audiences into believing 'fixing' the Murray is all about things like; banning rice growing, that NSW irrigation are 'stealing' S.A.'s water, and that the problem -on the whole - lies upstream.

The wording of the two criteria of this Bill ³, to me, are yet a further example of this.

Solutions:

- Strike out this Bill.
- Ensure that the MDBA Basin Plan sensibly provides for balanced and sustainable outcomes - that do not disadvantage the large minority of rural residents that; live in, work in and are an intrinsic part of Murray Darling Basin. It is these people, in their many occupations, that directly contribute to richness of this region socially, economically and also environmentally.

² *Socio-Economic Context for the Murray-Darling Basin, ABS/ABARE/BRS to MDBA, September 2009*

³ *Water (Crisis Powers and Flood water Diversion) Bill 2010, section 9 Extreme Crisis.*