

Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Incorporated (MPII)

in conjunction with the

**Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council
(YACTAC)**

Submission to the

Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport

The Murray-Darling Basin

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Introduction:

Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc (MPII) represents irrigators who pump directly along the full length of the Murrumbidgee River, and Yanco Creek System. Our members live from Batlow to Balranald and from Jerilderie to Moulamein. We also have a number of “operators” amongst our members although volumes of water are vastly smaller than the irrigation corporations. We are approximately one third of the diversions on the Murrumbidgee system being some 680,000 megalitres dispersed amongst approximately 500 members.

We wish to have noted that our organisation is in full support of the responses submitted by the NSWIC and the National Irrigators Council (NIC). Both of these organisation’s have provided a much more detailed in depth submission on the Guide to the Draft of the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the technical text provided by the Authority so far.

Due to the detrimental effect the Guide to the Draft of the Proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan will have if implemented, MPII submit their view on behalf of our communities at large. MPII stress that all Murray Darling Basin residents will be socially and economically decimated if this proposed plan were to take place.

General Comments:

The Murray Darling Basin Authority’s development of the Murray Darling Basin Plan in its current form has the ability to set guidelines that will influence the level of food production in the Murray Darling Basin. It is disturbingly obvious that the objectives of the National Water Initiative agreed to by the Basin States in 2004 has not flowed through to the Commonwealth Water Act (CWA) and that the triple bottom line of optimizing social, economic and environmental outcomes will clearly not be achieved.

MPII members and their surrounding communities are astounded that whilst the MDBA has been chartered to adhere to the Water Act 2007, surely common sense should prevail if their proposed outcome will decimate regional communities in the Basin. On numerous occasions MPII has recommended that the Authority challenge the Minister for Water on the triple bottom line outcome which will not be achievable under the CWA in its current form.

MPII members and their communities are the custodians of the MDB environmental assets including public and privately owned systems. Many of our members have lived and worked alongside the MDB system for many years and witnessed the environmental behaviour and changes during extended dry periods. It is extremely disconcerting that local knowledge is not being accredited to the findings used to arrive at the figures in the MDBA’s guide to the proposed Plan. Whilst we respect that the Authority and their staff commissioned to develop the guide are environmentally well educated, it appears that practical research and knowledge have not been included.

MPII is of the view that surveys on wildlife and fish carried out by the Authority via commissioning scientists has been very limited in terms of the method

used to arrive at their findings. One example of how to achieve a more definitive and robust method of deriving accurate fish numbers would be to approach local angling clubs who have historical knowledge and constant experience in their local waterways.

In a relatively short timeframe, Mother Nature has satisfied the requirements for the MDB environmental systems. Many of us that reside along side key environmental asset are relishing in the restoration of the flora and fauna. On the contrary, we have witnessed the damage to many of these sites brought about by triggered artificial watering events. Therefore, we urge the Committee to recommend that the MDBA cross examine the environmental watering requirements and provide a robust environmental watering account encompassing engineering solutions for the environmental sites with state of the art works and measures to ensure every gegalitre is in fact required. It is the view of MPII that the latter would provide a more balanced approach than simply creating a constant flow of water down the system allowing for over bank flows. MPII note that prior to man made regulation of the system the proposed environmental watering requirements did not occur. The systems natural environment was accustomed to extended dry periods followed by floods which are being experienced this year.

MPII suggest that the our political leaders take into account the lessons from the outcome of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission where they determined it is local intelligence and management that is at the core of better control solutions and outcomes.

Balancing Environmental Requirements:

NIC and the NSWIC have covered the collective issues surrounding environmental watering, however MPII wish to elaborate on the Yanco Creek and its Tributaries. Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council (YACTAC) is a group which formed to balance the protection of the systems' riparian needs with the community. YACTAC has been receiving support and funding from government agencies to not only enhance the system but to protect its positive attributes.

The Yanco Creek and its tributaries feed off the Murrumbidgee River and the system creates a corridor for fish and wildlife between the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers. The system has and remains to be highly scrutinized in terms of its value to the environment and agricultural productivity. Whilst we are fully aware that compromises will be required if the MDBA is to develop a balanced outcome, how will they pick one system from another?

Using the Yanco Creek system as an example, any potential water savings made by the procurement of water entitlements requires a balanced approach to protect the environment whilst maintaining a certain level of agricultural production. These actions and decisions must not be taken lightly.

MPII is of the view that the CSIRO reports issued over the past eight years reflect poorly on what was once this countries premier scientific research organisation and that their sustainable yields report has been used for the guide's recommendations.

In conjunction with the CSIRO sustainable yields report, the Sustainable Rivers Audit (SRA) has also been accredited by the MDBA. MPII have challenge the MDBA with using the SRA findings that were researched during a record dry period with phrases such as “*best available science*” used.

Responses to Terms of Reference:

a) the implications of agriculture and food production and the environment

MPII have been frustrated and dismayed with the lack of investigation of implications. Any investigations, models used, or surveys have been rushed or clouded by the lack of evidence or incorrect use of models.

b) the social and economic impacts of changes proposed in the Basin

This issue has been covered already in this submission.

c) the impact on sustainable productivity and on the viability of the Basin

MPII believe that analysis performed on economic sustainability to this point has been far too narrow. By this we refer to the “tipping point” where the decline in volumes of production will not support processing plants etc.

d) the opportunities for a national reconfiguration of rural and regional Australia and its agricultural resources against the background of the Basin Plan and the science of the future

No comment at this point in time.

e) the extent to which options for more efficient water use can be found and the implications of more efficient water use, mining and gas extraction on the aquifer and its contribution to run off and water flow

Please refer to comment in the NSWIC submission

f) the opportunities for producing more food by using less water with smarter farming and plant technology

It goes without saying that irrigators in this country aspire to use less water with state of the art farming and plant technologies. The top percentage of irrigators who have access to funding are already setting an example in this regard.

g) the national implications of foreign ownership, including:

1. Corporate and sovereign takeover of agriculture land and water and
2. Water speculators;

Please refer to comments in the NSWIC submission

h) means to achieve sustainable diversion limits in a way that recognized production efficiency

Prior to responding to this question, MPIL request that the MDBA, Senate Committee and Ministerial Committee exhaust the potential of savings via works and measures within the environmental watering requirements.

i) options for all water savings including use of alternative basins; and
ii) any other related matters.

MPIL support further extensive examination and the potential of acquisitions of water from other sources and the possibility of increasing the volume of our storages.

Environmental Works and Measures

To add to the example provided by the NIC, it is astounding that the MDBA would not have made further consideration to the possibility of works and measures on environmental sites. Once again, MPIL submit that there would be a win win for all if this strategy was progressed. MPIL is of the view that if protection of the key environmental sites can be achieved with minimal over bank flows, this common sense approach would assist with the reduction of volumes predicted by the MDBA for the environment.

MDBA process of delivering the Guide

MPIL attempted on many occasions to advise the MDBA on an appropriate process to engage with stakeholders in the MDB prior to the release of the guide, however, even though the MDBA has a large bucket of funding for this purpose, they didn't or couldn't deliver on our recommendations.

The MDBA engagement team visited our regions approximately three times prior to the release. These visits occurred on short notice and in the first instance when irrigators' were at the peak of their busy time, hence lack of attendance. The meetings that did occur were brief and did not allow stakeholders adequate opportunity to ask questions or to convey their local knowledge to the MDBA.

Legal interpretation of the Act

MPIL have continually been informed by Mike Taylor, ex chairman, MDBA, that the legal interpretation of the Act has influenced their findings favouring the environment, whilst on the contrary our political leaders are vowing that a triple bottom line can be achieved within the constraints of the Act. This dilemma has added to the anxiety of our constituents and exacerbated their frustrations with the recent resignation of Mike Taylor. It is imperative that this issue is resolved as soon as possible so that all stakeholders involved in the Murray Darling Basin Plan can move forward collectively and achieve a triple bottom line outcome without any further conflicting interpretation of the Act.

Key Points:

- **Commonwealth Water Act requires a Business Plan (Environmental Water Accounting Plan) prior to major decisions being implemented**
- **The States Water Sharing Plan's (WSP'S) require sufficient time to adjust to water buyback and more normal inflows prior to determining a SDL.** *In recognition of the CSIRO sustainable yield report that states that the past dry ten year period is the worst case scenario.*
- **The Committee should acknowledge the environmental measures that were built into the WSP's which have not had time to be measured and monitored due to the last 10 years of drought. These environmental measures should be considered (post drought) before introducing a new round of SDL's under the Basin Plan**
We have been through significant reforms and millions of dollars have been invested in the NWI, however under the guide to the proposed Basin Plan, the goal posts have been changed!
- **Key Environmental assets need to be determined and justified**
- **Regional social and economic impact studies need to be revisited using local knowledge**
- **The lack of recognition that the Basin provides food and fibre for a world that is predicting massive food shortages by 2050 needs to be addressed**
- **Triple bottom line outcome is required**
- **Broader engagement with stakeholder's and scientist's**

Summary:

Water resources in the Murray Darling Basin have been controlled and managed by successive government of all political persuasions for more than 100 years, yet the MDBA is informing us that the Basin is in a parlous state. This begs the question "what difference will the new management structure make when there is an apparent lack of experience in water and environmental management?" Our reasoning behind this statement is that anecdotal experience from riparian landholders, and the evidence found by marine microbiologist Dr. Jennifer Marohassy, to name a few, is that the condition of the Basin Rivers is in a "robust" category considering the past ten years of dry climate conditions. Even though the MDB has experienced the driest period in 100 years, continued population growth, interception from farm dams and tree plantations, the system has still maintained water flowing from top to bottom with marginal irrigation allocations and reduced turbidity.

Salinity levels at Morgan are at low levels and anecdotal evidence is that fish stocks are rapidly improving with the European Carp not seen in the proportions that they were ten years ago.

MPII urge the Committee to recognise that the majority of consumptive users of water only have access to water via their allocation when the water is available. Yet, the Authority is of the view that the consumptive users should wear the reduction overall.

At the end of the day it may not be the individual irrigator (if he or she chooses not to sell entitlements) that won't survive, per se, in the MDB if the guide to the proposed Basin Plan is implemented, it will be the communities that will suffer at large. Having said that, irrigators' standard of living will continue to suffer post drought due to communities not having the ability to claw back the decline in services such as health, education and retail requirements to manage their operation. Included in this decline will be sporting and recreational facilities which are all essential elements for health and well being.

End