

Submission

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the Provisions of the Water Act 2007

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In the late 1940s and early 1950s, we swam in Murray River lagoons east of Mildura. We sat and watched the abundant bird life. We dived for mussels to catch Murray Cod. My first fish was a 3.5 pound specimen. We witnessed the more frequent floods, the Murray's clearer water and the comparative ecological health of the river.

Since then the lagoons have gone, the water has become fouled and reports show that most of the magnificent red gums beneath which we camped are in terminal decline. The ecology of the Murray is sick. Anyone with longitudinal experience such as mine could not say otherwise.

The reason for this is obvious. Water has been extracted, mainly for irrigation, at a rate far beyond the capacity of the river system to sustain. Moreover, notwithstanding the recent floods, the latest climate science indicates that rainfall throughout the basin will decline, putting further stress on the river system.

All of the above is well-known. Why then do we have pressures to return to unsustainable water extraction? The 2007 Water Act correctly prioritises the need to reduce water extraction and return water to the environment. The ecosystem needs it and the irrigators and towns need healthy rivers.

There has been much emotionalism surrounding the issue of water rights. Unfortunately, over-allocation in the past has led to a sense of entitlement. Many irrigators, accustomed to accessing water throughout the seasons have not had to think carefully about the health of the river. The 2007 Water Act was designed to do the thinking they had failed to do. Enshrined in it is the obvious point that

without a healthy river system, irrigators will be left with increasingly unusable saline water and towns will lose their water supply.

A point rarely appreciated is the importance of the Murray Darling system for tourism. As the population ages, passive recreation, such as bird-watching – those that are left – and bush-walking will become more important.

I urge Senators to heed the science, ignore the report-burning emotionalism and retain the Water Act 2007. The entire Australian community depends on a healthy river system.