



River Lakes and Coorong Action Group Inc

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Winner 2009 Jill Hudson Environmental Award

Response to questions on notice Senate Environment Committee Hearing

Water Amendment (Long Term Average Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment) Bill 2012
Water Amendment (Water for the Environment Special Account) Bill 2012

- a. Do you believe it is likely that improvements in scientific knowledge and engineering works will result in less water being required to fulfil the environmental requirements of the plan?

If this question asks whether improvements in scientific knowledge and engineering will return more water to the system, our response is that we do not believe this is likely. At the same time we feel there are too many unknowns in relation to the Plan, to be able to answer this question. One of the objects of the Water Act 2007 is to 'ensure the return to environmentally sustainable levels of extraction for water resources that are overallocated or overused'. We fear, and the best available science indicates, that the current Plan fails to protect and restore several key ecosystems, natural habitats and species reliant upon a healthy Murray-Darling Basin

There have been serious critiques by the Wentworth Group, the CSIRO and the Goyder Institute. The substance of these critiques should be addressed as the first priority. We believe that the ecological system of the Murray Darling Basin is far too complex, relying on high and low flows, for damming the system to be anything other than another impediment.

We would support the building of levy banks and the removal of other physical constraints.

- b. In your opinion what is the best way to measure the environmental health of the Murray Darling Basin System?

We agree with Dr David Paton that the starting point for any management plan should be describing what a healthy environment might look like. We need further scientific investigation to develop a description of benchmarks of a healthy River system with clear performance indicators defining a healthy environment and equitable water use.

We need a real target for water to be returned to the system, as a starting point, as in 3,200 GL, not an aspirational target of a possible extra 450GL .

This may provide an adequate starting point for measurement of the health of the River by a network of local groups providing information to an entity like the Commonwealth Water Holder.

- c. Briefly, could you outline the positives and negatives of reducing system constraints to improve the movement of water within the Murray Darling Basin?

The positive of reducing system constraints is that it may provide sufficient water to meet the requirements of the Water Act and ensure the return to environmentally sustainable levels of extraction for water resources that are overallocated or overused.

We are not aware of a negative aspect of removing system constraints but we do understand that where constraints are physical, there may need to be a levy bank built to protect towns with high populations, or a bridge may need to be raised, and so on. It seemed obvious to our members to release water over time, to avoid flooding where floods are not wanted (although we note that many farmers and graziers will welcome opportunistic flooding).

Where regulations comprise the constraint, we suggest that the Plan should make recommendations about amending policy.

- d. In your opinion, what is the best way from this point in time, to return environmental water to the Murray Darling Basin and why?

We concur with the Productivity Commission that water buybacks remain the most effective way of returning water to the system, including on a cost basis. Water buybacks are able to respond more to seasonal and climatic environmental needs

We note the dialogue of the ANU Crawford School of September 2012 that “In the area of governance it was put that the Commonwealth water holder will be able to achieve all the aims of the Basin Plan given sufficient purchase of water, irrespective of the States watering plans or the passing of a Basin Plan by Parliament. Once the water holding meets the SDL requirements, an effective environmental watering plan by the Commonwealth has the potential of meeting the needs for environmental water.”

With regard to works and measures, we feel that there should be priorities established , for example upgrading open channel systems wherever possible