



Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

Web Site: www.bluemountains.org.au

Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

Thursday 17 March, 2011

Committee Secretary,
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committees.

Email: legcon.sen@aph.gov.au

SUBMISSION RE: The Water Act 2007 and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan

1. Introduction

The Society has a membership of about 850 and principally serves the Greater Blue Mountains (GBM) region, including the World Heritage Area, whilst interacting with many other local or much broader-based environmental groups through formal affiliation. Through its Water Conservation Subcommittee, the Society is concerned with the hydrological regime, comprising the detailed interdependence of groundwater and surface water, and the impacts of mining, coal-seam-gas extraction, agricultural use and social needs on the balance between and sustainability of these resources and their dependent ecosystems.

The Greater Blue Mountains pertinence to the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) is largely restricted to its western extremity where some of the water courses form a small component of the Murray-Darling (M-D) catchment. The greater proportion of the GBM sources water systems which principally drain eastward and include a substantial component of Sydney's water supply.

Although recognising that submissions were due by Friday 18 March, the Society emphasises that it is a wholly volunteer organisation, devoid of paid staff. Finding a member to formulate a response within tight time constraints is not always feasible. As this document will be in your email before Monday 21 March, the Society trusts that it will be formally accepted.

Would you please acknowledge receiving the document and indicate whether the submission has indeed been accepted?

2. Background

For far too long, the groundwater and surface waters of the MDB were treated as ‘infinite’ and open to plundering, through extraction and capture respectively, for dominantly agricultural purposes. With increasingly large scales of operation and changes in the favoured commodities to meet both Australia’s expanding population, and Australia’s export markets to the burgeoning World population, the MDB’s fragility has been recognised. This recognition has not come before the MDB has lost ~90% of floodplain wetlands, ~80% of the dependent waterbird populations, ~90% of the native fish populations and ~80% of the River Red Gum forests. Over-extraction and over-allocation of water resources comes at an enormous environmental cost.

To redress the foregoing travesty resulting from gross over-extraction with little regard for the consequences, the Water Act 2007 was introduced. Its aim was to provide for an MDB plan which restored the extraction of water resources to environmentally sustainable levels.

The furore following the release of the draft report shows that even minimal environmental sustainability is incompatible with the short-term economic and social demands of highly vocal and organised communities. Blame was placed on inadequate communication by government and the Authority, but this speciously disregards the intensely emotive responses of irrigators and dependent communities. The argument that environmental death is a step on the way to the death of the agricultural businesses and their associated communities falls on deaf ears.

The Senate Inquiry is to *examine the provisions* of the Water Act, but this seems to be little more than a euphemism for diluting the provisions and deferring essential environmentally sustainable action. The Society contends that healthy communities and their quality of life depend on healthy rivers within a sustainable environment. Short-term exploitation is a recipe for economic decay and social oblivion.

3. Comments

- The reason for introducing the Water Act 2007 was to combat grossly unsustainable extraction practices by an expanding and increasingly focused irrigation industry. The impacts of climate change can only blacken the intensely unsustainable picture.
- The Water Act 2007 is satisfactory as it stands; it recognises the need to return extraction to long-term sustainable levels. If this is not preserved as the over-riding objective, then everyone will lose and the MDB will for ever be compromised.
- The Water Act 2007 recognises and prioritises the need to reduce water extraction and return water to the environment for the benefit of the dependent ecosystems and their associated human communities. The only reason for amending the Water Act 2007 must seemingly be to dilute its provisions and further sacrifice the environmental heritage of the MDB.
- Decisions about sustainable levels of extraction under the Water act must be based on the best available scientific data. An amended ‘balance’ favouring social and economic objectives, to the

detriment of the environment and in the face of the science, is political expediency. Why? Because environmental needs are way below minimal requirements, whereas social and economic 'wants' are expanding. The political input should be to manage what the science demands (e.g. through compensation and relocation packages), rather than attempt to distort the science.

- Logic decrees that the only alternative to environmentally sustainable extraction is environmentally unsustainable vandalism.

*Dr Brian Marshall,
For the Management Committee.*