Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport – the Management of the Murray-Darling Basin.

Catchment Management Authorities in NSW are pleased to provide the following submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport – the Management of the Murray-Darling Basin.

Eight of the thirteen NSW CMA are located within the MDB area. They are Border Rivers-Gwydir, Western, Central West, Namoi, Lachlan, Murrumbidgee, Murray and Lower Murray Darling. The roles and responsibilities of Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) are outlined in Tag A.

Terms of Reference

NSW CMAs collectively provide comment on the management of the Murray-Darling Basin, and the development and implementation of the Basin Plan, with particular reference to:

(a) the implications for agriculture and food production and the environment;

- A return of water to the environment will be beneficial for riverine and floodplain environments with careful and adaptive management
- Integration of both land and water management practices is essential in achieving resilience within ecosystems.
- Increased environmental water will provide additional benefit to some floodplain farming and marsh farming activities
- The current proposal could in the short term provide less security for investment in agricultural production systems at a range of scales and therefore potentially less diversity of products and food manufacturing. Particularly impacted will be agricultural commodities already under cost price pressure.

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

- Social and economic impacts on the wider community other than entitlement holders, who will be compensated through water purchases, does not appear to be considered
- The multiplier effect of agricultural economies does not appear to be recognised.
- Freeing up of trade and water buyback implications have not been explored within the guide

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

- A shift from high input irrigated agriculture to dry land production systems will result in decreased productivity. Reduced productivity will have a flow on effect to other sectors of the community
- Landuse changes could put pressure on the long-term sustainability of some areas

(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;

- There are opportunities for strategic water purchases and reconfiguration through working with group irrigation companies/ and communities to ensure that whilst the reconfiguration reduces the irrigation footprint the remaining industry is able to sustain regions/groups and their associated communities
- Using a resilience thinking analogy, options for transformation of some areas must be considered and supported

(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;

- There are many opportunities for more efficient water use and delivery in regard to storm water management, bulk water delivery, storages and on-farm systems
- Options for more efficient water use for environmental water use should be considered. Local knowledge and resourcing is imperative to creating strategic solutions.
- The National Water Commission has been active in highlighting significant risks to the water resource from mining and coal seam gas activities.
- Consideration of the impacts of reafforestation as climate change mitigation should be carefully considered

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

- Australian agriculture is at the forefront of developing technology to address productivity; however significant investment in research and development is imperative to reverse a previously waning trend
- Australian farmers have historically used innovation to remain profitable and keep ahead of ever increasing costs
- Recent and prolonged drought across the MD Basin has hindered the capacity for land managers to embrace significant productivity gain, however the appetite still remains.

(g) the national implications of foreign ownership, including:

(i) corporate and sovereign takeover of agriculture land and water, and (ii) water speculators;

- Collectively CMAs do not have a view on this subject; however community members hold a range of views.

(h) means to achieve sustainable diversion limits in a way that recognises production efficiency;

- Investment in on farm efficiency savings, systems infrastructure and retirement of irrigations sub-systems by community negotiation is an appropriate means to achieve water savings.
- These programs should be delivered regionally to ensure community ownership and rapid delivery. We also believe that these should be pursued as a priority and not as an add-on to other water-related programs.

i) options for all water savings including use of alternative basins; and

- All sources of water savings should be explored; however it is unlikely that there are any significant alternative water sources that do not already have ecosystem and consumptive purposes.

(j) any other related matters

- CMAs contend that integration of land management practices and water quality and quantity are intrinsically linked with socio-economic systems that require long term certainty from government. The concepts of resilience thinking are being piloted by some CMAs in NSW Murray Darling Basin CMAS and there is scope for the Murray Darling Basin Authority to investigate this approach, particularly from the perspective of linked socio-economic-ecological systems
- The current top down approach has not delivered what was required. There is little regional engagement or involvement in the Murray Darling Basin Plan or water recovery programs delivered by the Australian Government.
- Automatic telemetry on consumptive uses should be expedited, particularly groundwater heights and quality,
- Baseline measurement of environmental assets should be comprehensively completed prior to investment and reform actions,
- Monitoring and reporting programs should be agreed and resourced at the catchment scale,
- Adaptive management based on evaluations of the above at the catchment scale is the most appropriate, efficient and community agreeable method for the Basin Plan implementation.

Tag A

The roles and responsibilities of Catchment Management Authorities in NSW

Catchment Management Authorities in NSW were established under the Catchment Management Authorities Act 2003 to engage regional communities in the key natural resource management issues facing their catchments. They are a statutory body responsible for coordinating natural resource management in their catchment and ensuring that regional communities have a significant say in how natural resources are managed. They are the primary vehicle for the delivery of incentive programs funding provided by both the State and Commonwealth Government's to restore and improve the State's natural resources.

The Catchment Management Authorities Act 2003 has the following objects:

(a) to establish authorities for the purpose of devolving operational, investment and decision-making natural resource functions to catchment levels,
(b) to provide for proper natural resource planning at a catchment level,
(c) to ensure that decisions about natural resources take into account appropriate catchment issues,
(d) to require decisions taken at a catchment level to take into account State-wide standards and to involve the Natural Resources Commission in catchment planning where appropriate,
(e) to involve communities in each catchment in decision making and to make best use of catchment knowledge and expertise,
(f) to ensure the proper management of natural resources in the social, economic and environmental interests of the State,
(g) to apply sound scientific knowledge to achieve a fully functioning and productive landscape,
(h) to provide a framework for financial assistance and incentives to landholders in connection with natural resource management

With consideration of the CMAs core functions, roles have been identified and broadly include:

- Provide advice on matters concerning the integration of land and water functions
- Provide advice on and assisting in the delivery of community participation in consultation activities
- Inform water sharing planning by providing advice on in-stream values and water requirements for water dependent assets and other critical landscape functions through participation on interagency processes

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