

Submission - 'Water Legislation Amendment'



27 July 2021

Submission to the Senate in relation to the 'Water Legislation Amendment (Inspector-General of Water Compliance and other Measures) Act 2021'

In our submission to the Robbie Sefton Social and Economic Assessment Panel dated 3 April 2020 Murray Irrigation wrote "At a time of such great change Australian governments should create a single Basin-level body for strategic oversight, analysis and planning of the connected Murray-Darling Basin from Queensland to South Australia. No such body exists despite the best efforts of existing institutions; we would see the first task of this body as developing reform to meet the strategic, holistic needs of Australia."

We do not believe that such a body necessarily needs to withdraw powers from the States – it does need to be given the funding, legal powers and respect to assess performance independently and consider the future needs of the Basin.

The new Office of the Inspector-General is a positive step towards this type of management since it will audit, assess and report across the Basin.

The Basin is suffering from too much development in unplanned locations, which is damaging the sustainability of the river system. This impact will worsen as climate change intensifies.

There is a need to manage the river realistically and withdraw from commitments that cannot be sensibly discharged, such as the 450GL for South Australia that is already undermined by the socio-economic test and to allow new initiatives to be included to focus on achieving environmental outcomes rather than recover more consumptive water. There should be recognition of the urgent need to ensure there is a functional, connected, north-south system. Further buybacks from the damaged irrigation communities of the Murray cannot be countenanced. And it is the belief of Murray Irrigation that the physics of water need to be reflected in the way the Basin is managed – moving large volumes over very large distances within the water market is expensive in resource terms including environmental damage and needs to be charged within a water market as well as constrained to volumes that are deliverable.

As a first step towards strategic management and ensuring the Murray Darling Plan can be achieved and is trusted by Basin communities it is the opinion of Murray Irrigation that the new legislation should provide the Office of the Inspector-General with powers to investigate and report on:

- the adherence of States and Commonwealth to pre-existing agreements and obligations;
- the consistency and performance of approaches across the Basin in relation to measurement, monitoring and enforcement;
- audited processes and data allowing a benchmark approach to river management efficiency and the minimisation of water losses;
- the common conclusions and recommendations of the 40+ reviews and reports on the Basin and the actions that have been implemented in response to these by agencies and Governments; and
- the investigation of any corruption where this is evidenced.

Finally, Murray Irrigation believes it is essential that the new Office should be independent, trusted and report publicly.

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