

Senator the Hon Bill Heffernan

Re: Murray Darling Basin Authority Proposed Plan

Dear Senator Heffernan

As President of the Finley Chamber of Commerce Industry and Agriculture I feel compelled to provide the following thoughts on the Guide to the proposed Basin Plan as published and presented at the Community Information Sessions by the Murray Darling Basin Authority.

Much has been said at the information sessions and subsequently in the media about the lack of consideration in regard to the social and economic effect the Plan as suggested in the guide would have on the Communities of the Basin, so much so that we are now hearing promises of further investigations to be carried out to ascertain the facts that have been painfully obvious to those people who live in and are an integral part of the Basin for some time now.

Much has been said about the economic havoc that will be brought upon the towns of Deniliquin and Griffith yet nothing has been said as to the disaster the proposed plan will bring to the smaller towns without the critical population mass to survive and in particular our town of Finley and similarly the town of Coleambally, both towns whose mere existence was built on government sponsored irrigation schemes.

The promises of further investigations into the social and economic effects of the proposed plan do nothing to allay my fears that these information sessions, and what ever is subsequently added, are nothing more than an exercise to satisfy statutory obligations, real or imagined.

We have seen so many times before exercises such as this labelled as community consultation with, in the end, no regard to the thoughts put forward by the community.

It appears the thrust of the proposed Plan is an expectation that the water extractors of the Murray Darling Basin must adopt twenty first century technology to enable what is perceived as the environment of the Basin to be maintained as it was believed to be in the eighteenth century. The water extractors have quite clearly demonstrated a willingness and ability to accept change whilst on the other hand the environmentalists seem to live in a state of denial in regard to the difference between the natural environment and a man made environment as well as using twenty first century technology to support the environment.

European settlement in the Basin is a mere dot in the time line of events of the Basin and we quite possibly are yet to see the extremes at both ends of the scale of climatic effect. One thing is for certain; even through that short period European settlement there has been a number of occasions during that time when the basin has been subjected to long dry spells. A vast majority of those of us who live in the Basin have done so for some considerable time, for some it has been a number of generations, and I am going to suggest to you that in the main the people who live in the basin have a similar affinity with the land and its needs as that attributed to the indigenous community. We understand that nature and the environment is not an exact science. We understand that, naturally, the Basin environment is subjected to alternating periods of wet and dry. We understand that at the moment we are coming out of the most recent long dry spell. We understand that the environment will be rejuvenated. We understand that an over supply of water to the environment will create as much or more degradation than lack of water will and we also understand that the environment has been better supported during this long dry spell than ever it would have been prior to the construction of those apparatuses to support water extraction.

Figures contained in the guide confirm a belief to which I had arrived, by observation of events and occurrences, that much of Eastern Australia has been in a period of serious rainfall deficiency since the mid to late 1980's. It started in the north, worked to the south, and likewise has come the break.

This same period of time, most likely, coincides with or exceeds the working life of many of those who, by virtue of the fact that they are entitled to put the title professor or doctor before, or letters after their name, whether their training be in environmental sciences or not, claim to be authorities on the subject. The same applies to the politicians and the media. They have only seen the dry times; they have no comprehension of the wet. Most share, as you do, overseas or urban backgrounds. The learning is from text books, most likely European based, they are out of touch with reality. I know quite well a farmer from this area, whose daughter, when studying environmental science, was told that if she, when writing her papers, continued to apply her first hand rural based knowledge rather than the diatribe of the text book, she would ultimately fail. It is this type of narrow mindedness on which this proposed plan has been built.

The politicians who framed the act, behind which I have seen Basin chairman Michael Taylor most conveniently hide, demonstrate the same lack of understanding of the situation. We see them regularly on television and in the media demonstrating this lack of comprehension to a naive urban public who accept the rubbish they expound as factual.

The media also has a lot to answer for. Quite regularly we see images that are quite blatantly published out of context, out of plain ignorance or with malicious intent. The media also quite readily highlights the most outlandish and unsubstantiated statements from anyone who claims to represent conservation based organisations, all of which has built this hysterical belief that the end is near within the urban community. The few attempts by the media to show the other side of the equation fall well short of the mark through a lack of affinity with the subject.

There is no one size fits all solution to the problem. No one will argue that the problem is not complex. As have been identified the needs differ in each area of the Basin. The numbers used when calculating water usage are extremely rubbery. Environmental water is said to be required to replicate or build on seasonal flooding, yet, the natural events, such as the flooding that is being experienced at the moment are not included as water being used in the environment. Given the fact that much of the Basin has been in a rainfall deficiency since the mid 1980's value of the "cap" applied in 1994 has had no opportunity to be measured and there has also been no opportunity for any of the "buy back" water to be used let alone for the benefits to be evaluated.

I have lived in the Basin for almost fifty years, I have worked in the Basin, I have farmed in the Basin and have operated a retail business in the Basin and I have taken a particular interest in the history and development of the area in which I live. With the benefit of this fifty years affinity with the area I call home I can assure you that if adopted, the plan, as set out in the Guide for the proposed Basin Plan has the potential of returning the economy of this area to that of the 1930's.

The real effects of the buy back of in excess of twenty percent of Murray Irrigation Ltd water is yet to be experienced in our town. The lack of water during the drought has already brought about significant decline in regard to population and the economy. The adjustments proposed in the plan are in addition to those already in place and will only accelerate the decline of an area that once had a vibrant and thriving economy.

As indicated earlier I have no confidence in the path that is being followed but I do have the hope that sanity will prevail, the direction will be changed and a looming social and economic disaster will be avoided.

I remain

Yours faithfully

Rand Wilson  
President  
Finley Chamber of Commerce.