

Moree, New South Wales.

Meeting held at Social Co House, Moree, New South Wales. Thursday 5 October 2023, 10:00.

Hosted by The Hon Mark Coulton MP, Member for Parkes.

Panel members: Senator Perin Davey; Senator the Hon Matthew Canavan; The Hon Mark Coulton MP.

This meeting was conducted like a traditional Committee hearing with witnesses presenting to the panel.

Witnesses included representatives from The National Irrigator's Council – the peak industry body for irrigated Agriculture in Australia; Representative bodies for Irrigators in the Gwydir and Gingham Valleys; Local Government was represented by Mayors and General Managers from 7 Local Government Areas; Industry; Irrigators; Farmers; and Landholders were in attendance.

A summary of the key evidence follows:

Shifting goal posts

National Irrigators Council – Zara Lowien, Interim Chief Executive Officer

"With the original Basin Plan – Government is required to do a regulatory impact statement. That was done in 2012, based on the agreed plan we had at the time. Since then, we have a number of key pieces of information: We have The Morgan Review – when we had significant socio-economic data and scenarios presented about what impact further water recover would do to communities like Moree, Dirranbandi, Goondiwindi, and Wee Waa- if it went beyond the agreed plan."

"So we know that there are impacts, and we've got the evidence for that."

"The original regulatory impact statement didn't include that information – it came after, in 2017."

"It was also after a review of the Basin Plan in 2017 – which had a very similar analysis for the Southern Basin – although it didn't scenario test- it did say – *this* is the impact that the buybacks have on communities - we see impacts today. That wasn't in the original regulatory impact statement either."

"So now we are seeing a fundamental shift in the balance, and a change of the rules- which is looking at increasing the plan to a designated 3,130GL plan – that is essentially is increasing it additionally 450GL across the Basin – the impact of which has not been assessed."

"The original 450 – the original program for that (450GL) was tied to two key things:

- *a lifting of constraints in the Southern Basin, and*

- *the achievement of specific environmental outcomes throughout the Southern Basin.*

That has not been assessed to our knowledge as part of this change."

"They're fundamental changes that have material impacts on communities, and not (actually) what the Basin Plan can achieve. What we're asking through this process- and what I really want the Coalition to take back to the Senate Inquiry - There are material reasons why we think more work could be done."

"The MDBA needs to do that second assessment of what the cumulative regulatory impact is."

"..there are some underlying, (other) legal changes which are impacting irrigation rights and how certain those rights can be over the term of the plan, and potentially going beyond the plans 'extended timeframe of 2027"

Lawrence Springborg – Goondiwindi Regional Council (QLD), Mayor

“Another thing that worries me is changing Sustainable Diversion Limits – for us – we can’t get any more (water) and we can’t do with any less.. What does less mean for us?”

“Government should apply the same level of efficiency gauge to itself as the cotton industry has done – which is 2-3% cumulative, since the 60’s - and water use efficiency rating up into the 80%”

Gunnedah Shire Council – Jamie Chaffey, Mayor

[also The Murray Darling Association - Chair (Region 11); Country Mayor’s Association- Chair]

“All of the representatives from the Murray Darling Basin Association agree:

“we’re all in lock stead - we’re against buybacks, ..because we know it’s not good for our communities ...we think that there’s a better way”

“What we’d love to see – is a focus more on the constraints that are actually in the system already.” “There’s so much environmental water that is already there -but they’ve struggled with that fact against the purpose of why they’ve recovered this water”.

“How can you go forward and start talking about changing legislation or (with) new versions of the Basin Plan.. .. with information about what you *think* the impact is going to be?”

“I don’t think there is any information out there (at the moment) that shows a true figure - both the social and economic, and you can tack on the environment if you want.”

“It was always in the basin plan, I understand - there was a neutrality test. If that’s going to be taken out, then there’s no need to discuss any of those issues.. ..(as) the government .. will just do what they want..”

Lack of consultation / response

National Irrigators Council – Zara Lowien, Interim Chief Executive Officer

(Question asked: Was NIC happy with the consultation process provided by the Minister’s department?)

“NIC had a briefing on the day that the law was presented to the Parliament, and I know other groups had short briefings just beforehand.”

Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association – Lou Gall, Interim Chief Executive Officer

Regarding the 5000mg of over-recovered water:

“We wrote a letter to the Minister and asked for that water to be returned to our communities, and *at this stage we’ve had absolutely no response in respect to that.*”

Lawrence Springborg – Goondiwindi Regional Council (QLD), Mayor

“About 3 or 4 months ago the Commonwealth Dept came up and talked about the 5GL.. ..voluntary buybacks. They came into Goondiwindi and said it wasn’t going to be an open meeting, as they were still terrified of Covid.....they tried to send people out” ..

“they assured the irrigators there that it was all okay in Queensland, because they weren’t going to buy any water from Queensland – and somebody pointed out that New South Wales was ‘100 metres over that way” “We were concerned about the impact.... what happens there (just over the border in NSW) will undermine the reliability or confidence of *that* irrigating family, or corporation, and that will cause them to make other business decisions.”

"We've similarly written to Minister Plibersek about the 5000mgL buybacks.. saying 'please come'. There's only been crickets...not even an acknowledgement".

Gunnedah Shire Council – Jamie Chaffey, Mayor

[also The Murray Darling Association - Chair (Region 11); Country Mayor's Association- Chair]

"Both of those organisations have put a submission forward; both of those organisations are dead against buybacks."

"At the Murray Darling Association meeting in Murray Bridge Plibersek addressed the board.

She gave us an hour, but she made it very clear that they will be using buybacks.

'We've got the money and we could do it right now, but we're being kind to you'".

"Clearly she doesn't understand the communities in New South Wales."

"Without water - we won't survive."

Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association – Lou Gall, Interim Chief Executive Officer

(referring to the briefing from Minister Plibersek)

"..that too was part of the message we were given ... but that they wanted proof of what the SDLAMS have or will recover – and that they will be working with the information/ the numbers that are in front of them right now."

Gingham and Lower Gwydir Valley Landholders – Lou Doran, Landholder

"Last year, after a massive flood, we start salvaging what we could. Water was released, much more than they thought as they read things wrong ... their response was 'whoops'.. If an irrigator did that there would be fines and they would be held accountable."

"We don't agree with any more buybacks"

Economic impact

National Irrigators Council – Zara Lowien, Interim Chief Executive Officer

"There are some underlying, other legal changes which are impacting irrigation rights and how certain those rights can be over the term of the plan, and potentially going beyond the Plan's extended timeframe of 2027"

Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association – Lou Gall, Interim Chief Executive Officer

"Our experience is (this) that the return and compensation for the health of the community has been pretty pathetic for lack of a better word."

"Most of these communities are (already) naturally disadvantaged, they would be lower socioeconomic just because of the remoteness."

"The inclusion of socioeconomic clauses should really be maintained as critical"

Environmental impact

Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association – Lou Gall, Interim Chief Executive Officer

"The really important message that comes out of our Gwydir valley is the importance of complementary measures, that they should really be the primary mechanisms to enable the Basin Plan to actually achieve its intended outcomes."

"Complementary measures were designed as part of that original plan, to make sure that we got the intended outcomes for the health of the river system. And some of the information associated with putting fishways and fish passages in is really important."

"I think the most recent feedback from the NSW Chief Scientist surrounding the Menindee Lakes scenarios suggests that complementary measures and managing water better, will lessen the probability of some of the issues that have been seen with the fish deaths."

"There's also some really good numbers that came out of the Northern Basin Toolkit implementation and they should be acknowledged as a demonstration of what complementary measures can achieve."

The Hon Mark Coulton MP, Member for Parkes.

"Flood ways are managed farm to farm; you take a farm out of the middle and it creates problems."

Community impact

National Irrigators Council – Zara Lowien, Interim Chief Executive Officer

"it's been very consistent from our members and the presentation to the coalition backbench so far is the uncertainty that these changes create for communities."

Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association – Lou Gall, Interim Chief Executive Officer

"...We know when water buybacks happened within this community – there were some pretty serious socioeconomic impacts. The Morgan Review: from 2001-2011 the population in the area went from 15,500 down to 13,200.... a 14% drop. that's when a lot of the water recovery took place."

"Collarenebri was even more dramatically affected than Moree Plains was - a quick visit to Collarenebri by anyone wanting to follow this up should demonstrate that. Buybacks in great big volumes are not going to lead to great outcomes for any of the people in the Community."

"One of the other important things that came out of that Morgan Review, was that it really did have a major impact on the employment as a result of taking out that much water out of productivity."

"The importance of maintaining a socioeconomic test associated with that 450 is critical."

Australian Food and Fibre – Joe Robinson, Managing Director.

"This isn't something newit's happened before"

"Collarenebri – the evidence is here; this is actually what happens when you take water out."

"It's not us coming up with a potential theory- there is actual evidence .. all the infrastructure.. industry - there are problems here because they've closed down. It's destroyed the valley with the gavel."

"it's not theory! There's actual hard evidence. It's there, that's the outcome."

"We have a government spending \$500million on a referendum saying they're trying to close the gap for Aboriginal people and at the same time destroying their livelihoods and destroying the economic activity"

Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association – Lou Gall, Interim Chief Executive Officer

"If Joe's business has a downturn because.... farmers aren't ginning as much cotton .. those people still need to find a job.they're not going to move from here they have connections.. whether we're aboriginal or not .. we all want to live and stay in community and have the facilities."

"I point to a statement made.. .. that – 'the Job lost in the Northern Basin is a job gained somewhere else in the Basin -and that we are a fully transient workforce' that is not the case.. ..everyone's here because they want to live here"

"We don't want to leave town.. ..there is connection"

Moree District Council – Mark Johnson, Mayor.

"Collarenebri has been raised a couple of times. That is true evidence of what happens to communities when the water is taken away"

"The only way that I can see us getting out of socio-economic issues is through education, training, and employment. By taking water away from these communities, those opportunities would be lost."

"So- what Moree has lacked for decades is a big employer for people."

"Our council has been very fortunate to be given a Special Activation Precinct, established under the previous coalition government, which has thankfully been re-endorsed by the current Labor government."

"A Special Activation Precinct.. is about building value-added opportunities for (the) agricultural product our Shire produces. A \$200million investment by the State Government enables us to attract industry that will take some of that agricultural product and add to it, and it creates employment."

"If we're going to attract businesses to that Special Activation Precinct they need certainty."

"People will question if it's appropriate to come to Moree to build those businesses."

"When we see uncertainty from government .. particularly with what we're hanging our hat on-to save this town, this Shire, and the people in it - it creates big issues for us."

"If they want regional Australia to survive and grow – we need certainty.."

"We don't need uncertainty put in front of us."

"We're certainly a party to the letter (sent to Minister Plibersek) about.. ..the 5,000mgL over-recovery."

Bourke Shire Council – Barry Hollman, Mayor

"As a result of the last buybacks the population of Bourke went from 4000+ to 2000+"

"(And) even though we've just had the 3rd biggest flood that's ever come through the town, up until 2 or 3 weeks ago we were going back on water restrictions. The weir build has held that off for another 6 months".

"You see what water brings to my town. We had a thriving fruit industry before but that's all gone now. People will not come back and invest in my town if I can't give them more than 6 months water -it's that simple. If you take any more water from us, we'll be devastated"

"Water creates opportunities. It's the simple fact of life for everyone here today. That's what it does and without it-where are we all going to go?"

Implications for Local Government

Moree District Council – Mark Johnson, Mayor.

"The biggest challenge for regional Australia is the population decline."

"Unless governments come in and provide certainty.. ...provide investment - you won't help regional Australia."

Bourke Shire Council – Leonie Brown, General Manager.

"Taking Torale [Station] out of Bourke was like taking BHP out of mines"

"When they bought Torale ... in 2006, it took 67% of our water allocations; caused the schools to close down; we lost 2 major tractor businesses; we lost our Ford dealership; we lost our Toyota Dealership; we went from 4000 people down to 2600 .. it really decimated our community".

*"67% of the water was gone.. the horticulture industry closed down, whole farms went broke..
..We were lucky enough that somebody came along and purchased (the Abattoir)..
which is supporting us.."*

"We need water security.. it's either raising the damn wall here to give us more water or some sort of off-storage water supply, or a bigger water storage at the top of the system that we can actually regulate the water with. It's so important to our community."

"We don't have any water for human critical needs. The only water.. is for environmental needs.." "that was brought to a head at Murray Bridge last week... we actually sat with the Environmental Water Holder to discuss how do we get it into the plan to make sure that we can have water releases for critical human needs .. it's not there" (in the revised plan)

Narrabri Shire Council – Darryl Tiemens, Mayor

"Diversity is a great thing; though even with diversity in a region, you take water out of it and everything is impacted.. even mining, childcare, retail, hospitals, schools. We would see the Shire decline."

Over-recovery of water in the Gwydir Valley /

Being realistic about Environmental Outcomes

Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association – Lou Gall, Interim Chief Executive Officer

'We are actually over-recovered with 5000mgL over and above what is legally required under the Basin Plan. And that water..., with the amendments that are in place is going to be added to the 450"

"That water is almost never going to be able to get to South Australia. If we can even get it out of our two little wetlands in this Valley it then has to make it all the way to Menindee Lakes, which is quite a few [kilometers] , then it's still another 1400km before it actually gets to South Australia...."

“The probability of that flow ... having an impact on the levels in the Lower Murray is pretty much Buckley’s and None.. ..so that water should be returned to the community here. It could be utilised in any number of ways through the Gwydir Valley.”

“In 2018 the Productivity Commission (report) recommended “returning any identified Over-recovery to consumptive uses in accordance with Sustainable Diversion Limits”. (Recommendation 3.1) Yet at this stage the over-recovery hasn’t even been acknowledged.”

The Hon Mark Coulton MP, Member for Parkes.

(Regarding the over-recovered water from the Gwydir Valley)

“I’ve been involved in discussion for 6 of 7 years, and as of yet there’s been no protection come up with to actually return that water - whichever way”.