

WENTWORTH GROUP

OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS

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Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

24 February 2016

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee regarding the Water Amendment (Review Implementation and Other Measures) Bill 2015.

The Wentworth Group supports investment in environmental water and environmental activities as essential and complementary for the long term health of river systems. The Wentworth Group also supports flexibility for managing biodiversity conservation based on transparent scientific advice. We support the current laws which provide the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) with flexibility to trade water provided the trade will improve the capacity of the CEWH's water holdings to be applied to meet environmental watering objectives.

The Wentworth Group does not however support the amendments under Item 27 (Section 106) to allow trade revenue to be used for 'environmental activities' instead of buying water for the Murray-Darling Basin. We are concerned ongoing investment in environmental activities would lead to a long term reduction in environmental flows. We are also concerned that important environmental activities may be cost-shifted to the CEWH, and that the safeguards may be vulnerable to misuse.

The following paragraphs outline key principles relevant to the management of environmental water, and identify the main concerns about the proposed amendments in more detail.

The Wentworth Group supports water reforms which recognise:

1. *The essential role of environmental activities in improving environmental outcomes in river systems* (e.g. cold-water pollution treatment, stream bank stabilisation measures, salinity mitigation, fish ladders and carp exclusion devices). Environmental activities and environmental watering should complement each other in order to achieve optimal environmental outcomes.
2. *The important role of water trading in providing flexibility for managing Commonwealth environmental water.* This flexibility allows CEWH to manage short and long-term risks, optimise environmental watering outcomes and dispose of allocations in constrained flow reaches where further provision of water may lead to undesirable outcomes such as flooding of agricultural lands. A transparent scientific

evidence-based process should underpin decisions about how to manage environmental water.

The Wentworth Group raises specific concerns about the proposed amendments:

1. The amendments will likely reduce reinvestment in environmental water allocations and consequently leave even less environmental flows in rivers in the long term. As it currently stands, the 2,750GL Basin Plan recovery target is the 'minimum amount of water that will enable the achievement of ... Basin-wide environmental objectives'¹, and to date there has not been enough water acquired to meet this minimum target².
2. The *Water Act 2007* states that CEWH's functions are specifically related to water holdings³, and the *Environmental Water Holdings Special Account* was set up for this purpose⁴. The proposed amendments would broaden CEWH's responsibilities beyond those which were intended in the *Water Act 2007* and may encourage cost-shifting whereby CEWH's funds are used to subsidise environmental programs that should be funded from other sources.
3. Safeguards in the proposed amendments are difficult to enforce and may leave Commonwealth environmental water funds vulnerable to misuse. The SDL safeguard does not limit the volume of water allocations that can be disposed of, nor the amount of money that can be reinvested in environmental activities.

We thank you for this opportunity to make a submission to your inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Cosier
on behalf of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists

¹ MDBA 2011 The proposed 'environmentally sustainable level of take' for surface water of the Murray-Darling Basin: Method and outcomes

² Currently 1,954GL LTAAY as at 31 Dec 2015. <http://www.environment.gov.au/water/basin-plan/progress-recovery>

³ S105(2) states the functions of the CEWH

⁴ s113(2)(a) of the Water Act outlines the purpose of the Special Account is to support the functions of the CEWH in purchase, disposal and dealings with water and water access rights.