

Questions on notice Water Bills

Thank you for appearing at the committee's hearings on the following bills in Adelaide on Thursday 8 November.

- Water Amendment (Long Term Average Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment) Bill 2012
- Water Amendment (Water for the Environment Special Account) Bill 2012

The committee would appreciate your responses to the following questions on notice.

- a. Do you believe it is likely that improvements in scientific knowledge and engineering works will result in less water being required to fulfil the environmental requirements of the plan?

It is our view that it will not be until after the MDBA has measured the accuracy of its Basin model against a number of years of real data on the stream flows and how the environmental water is delivered to icon environmental sites and to riverine environments more generally that it will be able to gauge whether less water may be necessary to meet environmental objectives. The same will apply to proving up the savings generated from existing and planned environmental works and measures, but also potential works and measures that have not yet been fully explored that are in addition to the current draft figure of 650GL in water savings as a result of engineering works and improved efficiencies in water delivery for environmental sites and irrigation. In general it is our view that over time better science and experience in the management of engineered infrastructure, and in the management of the Rivers (including the Lower Lakes) will allow the environmental objectives in the Plan to be met with less water, than currently specified in the Draft Plan.

- b. In your opinion what is the best way to measure the environmental health of the Murray Darling Basin System?

Through objective measures of key water quality and biological indicators of health at the 18 principle environmental sites and on a valley by valley or river reach by reach basis – including such factors as intervals between wet and dry sequences; base river flow levels; biological health and biological diversity of main streams and associated tributaries and floodplains, other linked water bodies and wetlands; incidence of fungal blooms; salinity and water turbidity levels; diversity and incidence of native fish, birdlife and other species (understanding that these can be significantly affected by seasonal conditions); and the levels of incursion by introduced species (such as European Carp).

- c. Briefly, could you outline the positives and negatives of reducing system constraints to improve the movement of water within the Murray Darling Basin?

Reducing system constraints is a largely academic exercise favoured by environmental lobbies in modelling a pre-regulation and pre-development Basin system designed to maximise manmade flows down rivers to emulate natural flooding events. This approach to river management ignores the fact that the Southern Basin in particular has been a significantly regulated river system since the early 1900s with dams, weirs and locks for navigation and water storage to support irrigation and mitigate against major flooding. We cannot ignore the significant

development of urban centres, road, rail and bridge infrastructure, irrigation works, and river based tourism that has developed along all the major rivers of the Southern Basin with the direct encouragement of Governments over more than a century. The level of collateral damage to urban areas, transport infrastructure, productive rural land, regional economies, and a number of icon environmental sites including the Barmah – Millewa Forest complex from force feeding huge volumes of water over an extended period of time down the upper valleys of the Murrumbidgee, Goulburn and Murray and into the Lower Darling to meet the objective of extended 80,000 ML per day flows in the Murray at the SA border, should not be contemplated. Far better that the Government accepts that we have a naturally evolved and engineered river system that is constrained. To do otherwise is (as a prime example) to ignore the existence of the Barmah Choke as a major natural constraint. We continue to reject the environmental lobby arguments that “all we need is more water down the system” – because this is not a “just add water” exercise in river and environmental management. Currently we do not have environmental watering plans on which to assess what flows are required at various points in the system to meet environmental icon site objectives, and we do not have any detail on how the CEWH will manage the delivery of huge reserves of environmental water – yet we are openly talking about removing constraints (not in our view feasible) to engineer major above bank flood events in the lower reaches of the Murray that will require major flood equivalent flows in the upper reaches to meet that objective. Acts of God or nature are one thing but Government induced damage to private property and livelihoods should not be contemplated. As previously stated we support a balanced assessment of the interests in play in the MDB; A true triple bottom line approach – not environment first, second and third at the expense of Basin communities. A “No Constraints” approach to river management is unrealistic and should be rejected.

- d. In your opinion, what is the best way from this point in time, to return environmental water to the Murray Darling Basin and why?

We favour bridging the remaining gap in water needed to be recovered for environmental purposes in the Basin through investment in environmental works and measures; improved water delivery systems to irrigators; on-farm water efficiency programs; fine tuning of the rules governing river and storages management; and targeted environmental watering that delivers the highest possible level of environmental watering efficiency. While we note that the Commonwealth may wish to purchase water saved by irrigators through on-farm efficiency programs, we do not favour a return to general tenders for purchase of water – principally due to the potential to significantly constrain the consumptive pool of water available for trade, and due to the socio-economic impacts of stranded irrigation assets and the undermining of the economic base of irrigation reliant industries.

Senator XENOPHON: Finally, and supplementary to that, could you suggest, perhaps on notice, how you build into the legislation that sort of maximising the use of water for environmental return, such as the Lindsay Island measure. Can you perhaps reflect on that, because what you have just outlined is quite important.

Without suggesting a specific form of words, we would recommend that the legislation covering the MDB Plan contain a clause/s that directs the MDBA to continue to research additional efficiencies in

water use and management, including - potential environmental works and measures; improved water delivery infrastructure; urban, industrial water use and on-farm efficiency measures; amendments to river and storage management regimes; the efficient watering of environmental sites; and whatever other measures may be identified in future to maximise the return of water to the Basin rivers in support of achieving environmental and end-of-system targets. This should be done in close liaison with regional community based groups with extensive local knowledge which have an interest in or carriage of river and land management, such as the Catchment Management Authority or Land Management Group networks in SA, Victoria, and NSW .

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