



Advancing Australian Cotton

Constitution Alteration (Water Resources) 2019,
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission by Electronic Mail

murraydarlingplan.sen@aph.gov.au

28-2-2020

Dear Chair and Committee,

Re: Constitution Alteration (Water Resources) 2019

Cotton Australia is the peak body representing Australia's 1400 cotton growers and cotton ginnerers, the majority of whom operate within the Murray-Darling Basin.

Cotton Australia is an active member of the National Farmers' Federation's Water Taskforce, National Irrigators' Council, New South Wales Irrigators' Council and the Queensland Farmers' Federation, each of which play an important role in advocating for the rights of farmers, including irrigators.

Cotton Australia will be making a brief submission to the *Multi-Jurisdictional Management and Execution of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan* inquiry, but believes it is also important to lodge a very short submission to this Inquiry.

Cotton Australia is very concerned that this Bill is a somewhat knee-jerk reaction to the perceived failures of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Cotton Australia readily agrees that the Basin Plan is far from perfect, and that getting this far has been a frustrating process; however, it also strongly believes that the Plan is far from a failure.

In Cotton Australia's opinion, many people fail to recognise just how massive a social, environmental and economic undertaking the Basin Plan has been.

For good reasons or bad, it has shifted in a very short time period approximately 20% of the available extractive water pool from extractive use to the environment.

Currently, over 2100GI (of Average Annual Available) water has been transferred, and most of that was transferred in the period from 2010 through to 2015.

Critics of the Plan should try and imagine any other social/environmental/economic programme that has had such dramatic impact in such a short period of time.

It is no wonder that many irrigation-dependent communities have suffered terribly; it is no wonder simple supply and demand economics has forced up water prices; it is no wonder that communities are distressed; and it is no wonder politicians are under pressure.

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Added to this, the second half of this decade has been marked by one of the worst droughts (if not the worst drought) in recorded history.

So, not only have communities had to deal with the policy-driven changes and reforms that are the Basin Plan, but they have had to do it at a time when nature has contracted the available water supply to extreme levels.

There is a common lament that because we are in drought, because communities have run out of water, the Basin Plan must have failed. The Basin Plan could never, and will never be a cure for droughts and consequent water shortages. It is, and will forever be, a mechanism for sharing water in the available pool between the environment and extractive use.

Given the above background, Cotton Australia opposes this Bill to increase the powers of the Commonwealth in the area of water management.

It is Cotton Australia's view that as frustrating as it can be, it is better for water agreements such as the Basin Plan to be negotiated by the Commonwealth with the states, with the communities and with the many other stakeholders, rather than rely on an over-arching power.

The architects of our Constitution gave the primary power for water management to the states. Each state has developed its entitlement and allocation system in a manner that reflects among many other things, the hydrological, geographical, social, environmental and economical circumstances of their state, and it is essential that those circumstances are respected.

Rather than seek more powers, the Commonwealth should re-double its efforts, guided by the recommendations of the Productivity Commission, to work collaboratively with the states to improve the Basin Plan and ease the impact on the many regional and rural communities who have been impacted so badly by the massive and fast-moving reform.

For more information on this submission please contact Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia

Yours sincerely,

Michael Murray,
Cotton Australia

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