



14 December 2010

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport
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Parliament House
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Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into the management of the Murray Darling Basin

The Grampians Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committee sits on the southern boundary of the Basin in western Victoria. RDA committees have been established by the Federal Government to provide advice on regional issues and to advocate regional perspectives on behalf of the regional community.

The Wimmera sub-region is located in the western part of the RDA region and is based on the Wimmera River catchment and West Wimmera groundwater areas. For both the surface and groundwater Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDL), there is no proposed change under the Guide to the proposed Basin Plan. This is based on modelling and historic information.

The major contributor to the sustainable level of surface water used in the Wimmera sub-region is the implementation of the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline, completed in 2010. The Wimmera Mallee Pipeline was a community driven initiative, funded through a partnership between the Federal and Victorian Governments and the regional community. The pipeline conserves an estimated 103,000 megalitres per annum, historically lost through seepage and evaporation in the earthen distribution system. It has secured water for the future of the region and will return an average 83,000 megalitres to the environment every year.

The pipeline project is a great example of the benefits of building awareness and interest in the community about sustainable water management, generating support for the solutions and then uniting the region to advocate for action. As a result of the pipeline debate in the region, most people now understand the need to balance the environmental, economic and social needs of the region (even though there is ongoing vigorous debate about some minor issues).

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Following thirteen years of drought, the entitlement holders in the small Wimmera Irrigation District have agreed to close down the system. As a result, there are 19,000 megalitres of entitlements, and a further 9,000 megalitres of delivery system losses, potentially available to the environment from closing down this system. At this stage interest from the Federal Government buy-back program has been low as the Wimmera sub-region is not a priority region. There is strong support from the regional community to close the irrigation district, adding to the environmental benefits for the region's waterways.

Planning for sustainable use of groundwater in the Grampians region is ongoing as information and understanding of the aquifer systems becomes available. The interaction between surface and groundwater, and the pricing and value of the water harvested, are issues for future investigation and consideration.

The other link between the Grampians RDA and the Murray Darling Basin is the Goldfields Superpipe supplying Ballarat City from Lake Eppalock and the Goulburn System via Bendigo. The pipeline is able to supply up to 18,000 megalitres per annum. This allocation is from water savings generated through irrigation infrastructure upgrades in northern Victoria.

Sustainable management of water is a key to the economic and social future of regional Australia. The transition from historic allocations (often unplanned and not based on sustainable limits or environmental impacts) to sustainable management is difficult and impacts on all aspects of life in regional areas dependent on irrigation. This process needs to be managed sensitively and be done in a way that builds capacity in the regional community to adapt and prosper under the new scenarios. Support is needed for the transition, identification of new opportunities and the building of capacity for the regions to self-determine their futures.

The development of regional strategic plans provides a unique framework to build on the thinking for the transition. Current regional plans are built around the regional aspirations and identify key priorities for future development of infrastructure and services. They do not yet incorporate the significant changes proposed through the Murray Darling Basin Plan. The regional planning processes should be used to review regional aspirations and enable the region to plan for change.

RDA committees are well placed to lead this process, providing a linkage between the regional networks, state and federal governments.

Yours sincerely

Jo Bourke
Chair – RDA Grampians Committee