

Secretary: *afp***RECEIVED**

28 AUG 2002

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES
AND FORESTRY

Dear Secretary

I would like to make the following submission to the Standing Committee looking at future water supplies for Australia's rural industries and communities.

SUBMISSION TO WATER INQUIRY

There is much talk now about how to manage Australia's water resources, particularly in rural Australia. People talk about damming rivers, as happened to the Snowy River. But there is much opposition on 'green' grounds to these ideas.

I would sum up the water question this way...

How much water could be diverting from a river without significantly compromising its health and natural beauty?

Can we harness our waters and turn them inland? I think so, but with a sense of caution. I've heard over recent years calls for another plan like the Snowy Mountains Scheme, and talk about nation-building and all that sort of thing. I remember reading about plans to dam the Clarence River in northern NSW, to divert water across the Great Dividing Range and into the Murray-Darling or other systems; I've also heard some talk about diverting water from the Tully and Burdekin and other rivers in Queensland. I also know of the Queensland Government's plans to divert Brisbane's waste water towards the Darling Downs or somewhere near.

The danger with such schemes is that they can result in dependence of water from those dammed rivers, as happened with the Snowy River. When calls to release more water into the Snowy intensified after the 1999 Victorian State election, farmers in inland NSW opposed it because they were hit by drought. If we did dam the Clarence and divert its water into the Murray-Darling, what would happen if the Clarence region were to be hit by drought? Taking back its water would impact heavily on the Murray-Darling. We cannot afford a situation like this again.

But it doesn't mean that we should not try to do something. While at present much of rural Australia is affected by drought, at other times it is hit by flooding. We should look at ways of collecting our water when there is a flood and storing it somewhere. And maybe we need not dam our rivers to achieve this.

I believe that perhaps Australia could learn a thing or two from the Netherlands. In that country's southwest, after major floods in the 1950s, several dams were built to protect the region from flooding in the future. But there was growing public opposition to a proposed dam in an area called the Eastern Scheldt, because of its wildlife and its environmental beauty, as well as the local fishing industry. In the end the Dutch built a half-open dam, which is mostly kept open for the reasons above, and closed only when there is a risk of flooding. I've been wondering whether Australia should consider this concept - dams that can be kept open most of the time but closed at times of flood risks, or something like that.

Some have taken reasonable positions on managing our water. I heard businessman Dick Pratt emphasise the need to protect our rivers when talking about diverting water. And Watering Australia president Ernie Bridge says that rivers like the Ord in WA have such massive flows that only a tiny proportion need be diverted to irrigate the inland. I feel that we should do more flood mapping and work out where we can store water in times of flood, fix flowing bores in the Great Artesian Basin, undertake schemes to plant trees in some areas, and examine how best to use water in the Officer Basin near Kalgoorlie in WA. We must also see that we make careful use of what water is still in our river systems before we dam more rivers, as some observers suggest.

It's a tough job, but I think that we can get it right. And we must, as soon as possible.

WARREN GRZIC
20 Kay Street
CARLINGFORD NSW 2118
02 98766099; 02 92498049

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