



SUBMISSION TO

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT & HERITAGE

INQUIRY INTO
CATCHMENT
MANAGEMENT

The Southern Riverina Irrigation Districts' Council welcomes the chance to submit to this inquiry into Catchment Management.

Catchment management is applauded as a basis for managing the natural resources of a catchment. The enables ideally, management of the catchment on a catchment basis rather than restricted to state or regional boundaries.

However, problems do arise on border systems. For example, in NSW there is the Murray Catchment Management Committee whilst in Victoria there are similar groups. This belies the belief of "catchment management".

Profusion of Committees

The majority of our problems lie with the profusion of various committees, working groups covering water, flood, vegetation, wetlands, soil, salinity and so on. These are based on State committees, Federal committees and Murray Darling Basin committees.

Recently, we attempted to draw up a flow chart of just water resource based committees. These are tabled in Appendix 1 for your attention. We have not attempted in any way to construct the various groups for vegetation, salinity, water quality, soil, and so on.

This plethora makes it very difficult for landholders to be aware of their existence let alone participate in any real way into managing their natural resources. The majority of people in rural Australia do not even know of their existence. Let alone know how to contact one of the committee to pursue a problem or to find out more about those making decisions that affect them.

This is a very real problem for landholders. These people are trying hard to make a living from a business that is being progressively squeezed in terms of trade. They are not aware, do not have time or cannot afford the time to have some productive input into a committee decision.

Committee Makeup

The farmers we represent believe these committees are "stacked". This means that a community consultation process affecting a particular catchment, may have as part of that committee people who live completely outside that area in question.

There is also a problem with such committees having Government Agency personnel with voting rights. At the very least they constitute 25% of the committee and in one instance it constitutes the majority at nearly 87%. For instance:

1. Interstate Working Group on River Murray Flows (currently under review)
 - a) 13 Agency/Bureaucrats
 - b) 1 Environment
 - c) 1 Aboriginal
2. Murray Catchment Management Committee

- a) 10 Community (including 3 irrigator interests)
 - b) 2 Environmental
 - c) 2 Local government
 - d) 5 Agency.
3. Murray Lower Darling CRC
- a) 3 Irrigator
 - b) 3 Catchment Management (include wetlands)
 - c) 1 Development Board
 - d) 2 Environment
 - e) 2 LGA
 - f) 2 Aboriginal
 - g) 7 Agency
4. Central Murray Floodplain Management Committee
- a) 14 LGA
 - b) 12 Landholders
 - c) 9 Agency
5. Murrumbidgee River Management Committee
- a) 4 Irrigators'
 - b) 3 Environment
 - c) 3 Other
 - d) 1 Aboriginal
 - e) 6 Agency

These agency people are in a position of power (eg, information, position etc) in such committees and it is therefore untenable that they should have voting rights. These representatives should be there to provide support to the committee through administrative, knowledge and information.

It should also be noted that the many of committee do not reside in the valley or area in which the decisions are being made. The majority of these committee members will not suffer any consequences (financial or otherwise) in any way as a result of the decisions the various committees make. Nor will they be accountable to the communities whose decisions they affect.

A further problem which is being encountered by committees is the mind set of opinion from various sectors. This usually involves both agency and environment sectors. Many participants come into the committee with a point of view which cannot be swayed in any way. This tends to lead to a problem of the eventual vote being made on environmental or non-environmental grounds. That is why, the make up of these committees is vitally important. Decisions made must be by those directly affected by the outcomes. For example, if a decision is made to provide water for the environment, then it should be by those landholders and communities who will be affected by the decision. It gives them ownership of the decision without feeling as if they have been "railroaded". A further example is the mindset by environmental and community (city based) regarding irrigation and dams. Usually this is based on unfounded and biased knowledge gleaned from a metropolitan media who cannot understand or perceive farming and irrigation.

The environment lobby is usually provided with funding from government to pursue objectives in committee arenas, for example the NSW Access and Use discussion paper response by the Nature Conservation Council was funded by the NSW Government. This avenue is not open to many of the other participants such as landholders, irrigation groups and so on. This, in essence, provides an unequal playing field for the remaining participants.

Environment

Decisions regarding the environment are ad hoc and are not accountable - or so it seems. Objectives are not set and monitored to see if those objectives are met. There is rarely transparency in any process.

In addition, water is being targeted by every group, committee or inquiry. There is no coordination of purpose. A perfect example of this is the Snowy Water Inquiry. Its terms of reference did not allow it to take into account the affect of its decisions outside the Inquiry area (even if they were directly affected) and it targeted water efficiencies that it could not have ownership of.

A much better system, it appears, is a precedent set in USA in the Central Valley Project in California. Of note is that:

1. Objectives were set for environmental outcomes prior to establishment of a total environmental allocation.
2. Environmental rules set for five years with any changes resulting in purchase of land and or water.
3. Community support for buy back scheme for water from consumptive users rather than removal without compensation.

Conclusion

We would like to see some stability via:

1. Committee representation to be 100% from the valley, catchment, region or area that the decision is being made, this can include aboriginal, environment and other community interests.
2. Agency and bureaucrats are uneligible to hold voting positions on any committees.
3. If specific skills are required by the committee, then they be authorised for such input, eg agency staff can advise the committee, studies commissioned etc.
4. Majority decision is to be classed as valid, not 100% consensus as is required by the NSW DLWC for decisions regarding environmental flow rules in each valley. This is not even required for governments to be elected. This is a particular problem with the River Management Committees in NSW. Minister Amery requires consensus for environmental flow decisions. However, the majority voted this year to continue the 40% threshold rule in the 1999/2000 year. The Minister overturned the decision (when the green vote complained) as it was not a consensus and he then decided to allow 0% threshold. This therefore, was not a committee decision.

5. Long term rigorous studies into the effects of environmental decisions before changes are made and the setting of appropriate environmental objectives. During the phasing process, attention to ensure that environmental objectives are being met.
6. Immediate issue of a property right before further water is taken from irrigators' without compensation. This point is essential to ensure accountability of point 5 above.
7. Any water for the environmental is paid for by the community or purchased from willing sellers, that is compensation. This precedent has been set in America (ie Central Valley Project in California).
8. Streamlining of committees, ie in lieu of a plethora of committees for various reasons, fewer which cover all jurisdictions and numerous issues.