



Barrie Dexter
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Friday, 1 April 2011

The Secretary,
House Standing Committee on Regional Australia
ra.reps@aph.gov.au

Subject: Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia.

Attention: Scobhán Leyne, Inquiry Secretary.

Dear Scobhán Leyne,

We refer to our submission to the Inquiry; Submission Number 153, date received 3 December 2010.

This letter is a follow-up to the formal submission and briefly elaborates on some key matters which could be addressed quickly under existing arrangements.

The subject concerns community involvement [section 5 of our submission] and a process to break the current impasse and to make best use of "The Living Murray" [TLM] environmental water resource EWA [sections 4 and 6 of our submission].

As you know, "The Living Murray" (TLM) was created in 2002 and since that time and despite a near record drought has accumulated (boosted in large measure by the reallocation of the Barmah Millewa EWA of 150GL) over 500GL as a environmental water allocation (EWA) for potential use at those Icon Sites identified in TLM partnership legislation passed by the Commonwealth, Victorian, New South Wales, ACT and South Australian Governments. These Icon sites are (from upstream to downstream):

- Barmah Millewa Forest
- Gunbower, Koondrook, Perricoota Forest
- Hattah Lakes
- Chowilla Floodplain & Lindsay-Wallpolla Islands
- Lower Lakes, Coorong & Murray Mouth.
- River Murray Channel

Although these sites have all enjoyed considerable publicity, only one, Barmah Millewa Forest has a well documented track record of:

- EWA accumulation (including annual allocations, upper limits, lending and payback, and three documented use events).
- Storage in Hume Reservoir (including water accounting by River Murray Water).

- Rules controlling its use (developed by MDBA and approved by the Forum).
- Field applications (recommendation for use, observations and reporting).

The Barmah Millewa EWA was created in 1993 by the Murray Darling Basin Ministerial Council and in its day was the largest EWA in Australia. It has been used successfully in 1998, 2000/01, 2005/06 and this year 2010/11.

The first two EWA uses were approved, conducted and reported on by the Barmah Millewa Forum, a cross border community/authority based group established under Clause 14 of the River Murray Waters Act. The initial establishment of the Forum was “championed” by the then Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) whose Assistant Engineer Dick Francis together with an experienced outside mediator, encouraged all the interested parties to develop a high level of mutual trust and cooperation. The first community invitations were part of the 1991 Barmah Millewa Water Management Plan (BMWMP) activities. Community interest continued to grow during the Study which led in 1993 to the formation of a Community Reference Group (CRG). The CRG quickly agree representation (from over 180 local interest groups and authorities the CRG started life with a membership of 29) and in turn, Terms of Reference to review, on behalf of the MDBA, Maunsell’s 1991 Water Management Plan. The CRG met 11 times over 21 months (probably representing 4500 volunteer person hours) to agree a report for the Commissioners.

The CRG was able to bring extensive local knowledge and relevant science to the review and with the local authority members formed a balanced, workable advisory group.

The MDBC accepted the CRG review and its recommendations on the Water Management Plan and also approved Terms of Reference for the Barmah Millewa Forum

The MDBC’s support then continued with generous budgets for its quarterly meetings, funds for important forest research, the building of new regulators and other forest works, for publicity and school tours, secretarial services, for streamflow and biological monitoring and for annual planning and annual reporting.

Despite these achievements and strong support from a review in 2000/01 by the then President of the MDBC (Dr Roy Green), the MDBA Guide is unfortunately silent about the establishment, the achievements of the Forum and its history. Our earlier submission in Section 5 covered these aspects in summary. The full story can be found in:

Barmah Millewa Forum

A Short History of Community Involvement in the Barmah Millewa Forest on the River Murray.

Donald Macleod and Barrie Dexter,
September 2005.

Tapping into community interest and drawing on local knowledge is an approach worthy of application at the other Icon Sites. Preliminary advice indicates that similar groups would readily volunteer to advise on the management of their local Icon Site.

We would encourage your inquiry to draw on the Barmah Millewa Forum experience with cross border and interagency issues and recommend the reappraisal of existing groups and establishment of local community/authority groups at these icon sites that mirror the key attributes [local knowledgeable people, clear terms of reference, sound governance and accountability] embodied in the Barmah-Millewa Forum model set up by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission at the behest of the MDB Ministerial Council. The above history document can provide a good guide to possible membership as well as terms of reference for the initial studies and water management plans. Among the first tasks would be:

- Membership and governance
- Responsibilities and accountability
- Water Management Plan
- Reporting.

Having the MDBA act as a “champion” and financial backer for the new local groups could be a positive change to the current impasse. In addition, the enabling legislation is already in place and as the water is already accumulated, no further buy-backs are required. It would also offer local irrigation communities to chance to work with local environmental groups.

We would happily expand on any of the above points.

Yours sincerely,


Donald Macleod


Barrie Dexter