

Submission No. 30
Received: 11/10/2010



Mr James Harris

The Committee Secretary,
House of Reps. Standing Committee on Regional Australia
PO Box 6021, Parliament House, Canberra ACT2600

Inquiry into the proposed Murray –Darling Basin Plan

I have written this submission as chairman of NSWFA, Balranald branch. The membership of our branch covers a small number of irrigators but is mostly made up of dryland farmers and graziers centred around the town of Balranald.

The irrigators are likely to be severely affected by any reduction of water entitlement. The use of stock and domestic water for both the towns and farms are not able to be cut as stock are usually watered by troughs and tanks along pipelines and only the water required is taken from the river. Channel filled dams are largely a thing of the past in our district. The bulk of our members are dryland farmers and graziers who organise their own water infrastructure of underground and surface water for livestock and domestic needs. We are probably the most water aware and efficient water managers in the world through necessity, experience and our upbringing(I can still remember the tamarisk stick around my backside 50 years ago for wasting water!)

The proposed cuts to the irrigation supply will cause us to pay enormous increases in price for food. The loss and the downsizing of towns and loss of services will affect us severely.

The science needs to be done and redone, checked and rechecked as it is only a decade ago we faced imminent disaster from salinity on irrigation and much of our dry land. A federal government plan of attack was organised, only for it to be discovered that the predictions of disaster by scientists were 500% out! therefore the final Plan MUST be transparent and have scientific and economic credibility.

Australia needs healthy rivers, healthy communities and robust food production given our burgeoning population and world demand for high quality food.

Yours Faithfully

James Harris
Chairman, NSWFA Asscn, Balranald branch.

Term of ref. No 1: *the direct and indirect impact of the proposed basin plan on regional communities, including agricultural industries, local business activity and community well being.*

Opportunities for economic growth and diversification within regional communities

Previous relevant reform and structural adjustment programs and the impact on communities and regions

If there is any change to irrigation allocations the farmers concerned will be forced to restructure. The proposed 45% cut will result in more than half the irrigation farmers in the Murray Darling Basin being wiped out. Even at 20% the restructuring will result in the loss of at least 1/3 of the farms.

This in turn will result in severe job losses, a huge drop in the production of food and decimation of rural and regional communities.

All businesses will be affected.

Every effort must be made by the Murray Darling Basin Authority to understand that Australia requires the continued supply of affordable, good quality food. The importing of this brings with it many health and quarantine risks. This increases greatly with fresh produce.

The community of Balranald is already suffering the effects of closing down the red gum industry and the conversion of productive farmland to National Parks.

The red gum industry was operating on a sustainable basis of not milling old trees but *milling regrowth in a scientific and sustainable manner.*

The industry was closed down because of politics that had little to do with science and the common good.

The NSW government informed the local community that converting "Yanga" from productive farm to national park would result in increased economic activity. Five years on, this doesn't look like happening.

If government were serious about structural adjustment programs for the Balranald community, an industry based on our meat could be developed at a local level.

A local abattoir servicing both domestic and game animals could be established. Having to transport the animals over smaller distances would mean less stress on livestock and meat would reach consumers still retaining its unique flavours. The industry could, over time, broaden horizons to include national and international markets.

Term of ref. No 2: options for water saving measures or water return on a region by region basis with consideration given to an analysis of actual usage versus licence entitlement over the preceding 15 years

The most obvious improvement that could be made to the efficiency of the system would be to control evaporation.

The loss of water in western NSW and SA in shallow water storages both on the rivers and in dams pumped from the rivers would be enormous. Government should already have put sufficient resources into getting an affordable oil in place or some other mechanism to control evaporation.

Has water trading already shifted water usage away from all the inefficient irrigation areas? Government should have all the necessary data for the committee to make any further necessary decisions.

Irrigators have demonstrated, through this period of drought, an amazing ability to run their farms more efficiently. Government can't make the same claim about improved efficiency in water management. Is there room to get the extra water expected for the environment through improvements in operating the Basin more competently?

Remember, farmers are small business people and as such have to look to their own future; the cuts they make for survival affect other people. 'Belt tightening' often does more harm off farm than on.

Is all the water that is being used, being put to good use and in Australia's best interests? We question the allocations that have been held by MIS scams and foreign owned industries.

Are the scams defrauding the tax office? Are investors ripped off? Do the promoters of these schemes leave with money in their pockets when they fail?

When foreign owned companies export their product are they operating in Australia's best interest? Are they defrauding the tax office? Is their product sold in Australia as fresh produce or is it all exported to themselves?

How many poor laws, including the Water Act, are impeding balanced reform?

Town water restrictions were a poor hotchpotch during the drought. This should all be looked at now (post drought), with the aim of using more tank water and recycling grey water at all times. Cities such as Melbourne, outside the basin, should be able to collect sufficient water from their own catchments and NOT take water from the Murray Darling system.

Term of ref. No 3: *the role of governments, the agricultural industry and the research sector in developing and delivering infrastructure and technologies aimed at supporting water efficiency within the MD Basin.*

Measures to increase water efficiency and reduce consumption and their relative cost effectiveness

The first role of government is to create more efficiency in the system. There is very little unregulated water in the Murray Darling Basin and even that becomes regulated further down the streams. It is essential that necessary water is delivered efficiently. The talk of environmental flows during drought is rubbish because during drought there would be no flow in the lower part of the river system without dams anyway.

The Snowy Scheme was designed and developed to provide water for irrigation on the western plains, to generate hydro electricity, (greenhouse gas free) and very importantly to provide certainty of supply for stock and domestic needs along the river system. Government needs to display the vision that was shown in establishing the Snowy Scheme and the irrigation areas. The fact that it can all work with very little pumping is brilliant. The development of laser levelling, of efficient field size, shape and water depth demonstrates the initiative farmers take to respond to challenges of efficient and environmentally friendly use of water.

The Research Stations and CSIRO need to be brought back to full capacity and even expanded in places to develop better and better practices. Dedicated R&D investment will need to continue over an extended timeframe.

The agricultural sector needs to be fully engaged with the research sector and government in policy design, implementation and evaluation. This needs to happen right across the Basin and the country because any reduction in irrigation will result in more pressure on the dryland sector for food production.

The rules around water should be driven by science rather than politics. Remember the people who vote Green have no intention of changing their lifestyle at all. They live in the mistaken belief that farmers can make the sacrifice for them.

This inquiry should focus on the following principles in priority order:

- 1st stock and domestic use of the river; (towns, livestock, normal domestic use);
- 2nd good quality, affordable food; (both irrigation and dryland production);
- 3rd irrigation communities; (the irrigators and the towns developed around them);
- 4th environmental; (argument be limited to proven, relevant facts.)

Government has failed to put themselves in a good position for reasonable resolution of the MD Basin Plan by provoking a stupid fight between the Greens and the irrigators.