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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

22 JAN 2011

RECEIVED

Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia on the Socio-Economic Impact of the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Authority's Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities.

Presented to the Committee at its hearing in Deniliquin on Monday 24th January 2011 by Mayor Peter Dwyer.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to make this brief "submitter statement" to the Standing Committee. At the outset it should be noted that Council fully supports the submission made by RAMROC Chairman Cr Terry Hogan and Executive Officer Ray Stubbs.

Council is profoundly disappointed that its community has been largely excluded from any direct personal access to members of this Committee regardless of the reasoning proffered by the organiser. We are only a small community of 3,500 persons, however, we are real people faced with a bleak and uncertain future due to the possible implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. The publicity surrounding the hearings has been of an absolute minimum with advice of the Deniliquin Hearing being the subject of a media release issued 19th January 2011, some three working days notice. (The media releases are listed on the Committees website)

The lack of notice and the limited access to the Committee does not, however, diminish Councils' commitment to have the Water Act of 2007 repealed in its entirety as being totally superfluous and inappropriate. The triple bottom line objective as expressed in the Guide to the proposed Basin Plan is simply not achievable, as evidenced by the resignation of Chairman Michael Taylor.

The triple bottom line result can be analysed for our community as follows:-

- a) **ENVIRONMENT** – all members of communities in the Murray Darling Basin are now environmentally sensitive. Farming practices have changed, most of the smaller channels have been piped, much direct drilling takes place and levels of fish stock are closely monitored. User pays systems apply to all local government water supply schemes and most people engage in some form of recycling of paper, cardboard and P.E.T. products.

In the time of a drought, as we have experienced for the past decade, there is limited water for the environment, as there is limited water for the irrigators. In periods of wet weather, as we are now experiencing, there is ample water

for the environment and irrigators can look forward to a few years of high production on the back of the full water storages in the system.

The respective states have been preparing water sharing plans which would have provided an equitable share of water for all users including those of an environmental nature. It is understood these water sharing plans will now be aborted in the wake of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Water for the environment has historically been provided for thousands of years on a cyclical basis – there are dry times and wet times. In fact there has been more of a reliable source of water for the environment in recent years as a consequence of man-made water storages which have retained much of the short term flood flow for use in drier periods.

Implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan will not produce more water – it will simply allow more water to flow to the ocean in wet times, and dry periods. It will also destroy the viability of many small communities who rely on irrigators for survival.

- b) **SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC** – The social and economic impacts of the implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan are integrally linked. The permanent loss of up to 43% of irrigation water from our area will have a devastating impact on the economic base of the community. The agricultural industry is our biggest employer with over 28% of the workforce directly employed in agricultural pursuits (SKM Consultants). It is somewhat hypothetical to use a number for jobs which would cease to exist, however it could be in the order of 500 if the Plan is adopted as presented. Judith Stubbs and Associates estimate that up to 8,000 jobs could be lost in the Griffith area alone under the proposed Plan. These figures may be high, however they might not be, and, why take the risk of destroying communities in the pursuit of saving our environment which is already the subject of close scrutiny and many definitive plans of remedial action. A desirable environment also includes sustainable communities of people.

Loss of jobs will have a major domino effect on infrastructure – health, education, commercial and retail opportunities and all investment in real estate will grind to a halt. Serious health issues will surface and be fuelled with a growth in numbers of people suffering from depression with a consequential increase in domestic violence and suicide numbers. The value of homes will further decrease and the crime rates will escalate.

Already the lack of confidence in our region due to the release of the Guide to the Plan has been tangible in the drop in real estate prices. The uncertainty caused by this superfluous piece of legislation is simply not fair on the hard working members of our community.

SUMMARY

I am aware that the role of this Committee is to assess the impact of the implementation of the proposed Basin Plan on our communities. There is no doubt the impact will be devastating – the extent of the devastation is not known and cannot be estimated with any degree of accuracy.

I would ask that you consider our potential plight from your perspective as Federal Members of Parliament and look to alternative solutions to provide a more regular supply of water for our environment.

Surely the recent severe flood events of recent weeks have highlighted the need for more water storage facilities to assist in flood mitigation programs and at the same time provide a regular supply of water for irrigators and the environment. The cost to the community of the recent nation wide flood disasters would surely outweigh the cost of creating additional dams to mitigate such destructive water damage and provide on-going water supplies to support the environment and the irrigators. As Federal Members of Parliament it is time to stand up to the vocal minority elements who oppose such new dam sites and act for the silent majority in the national interests.

The last point I would make is that a decision on the matter needs to be made urgently as the uncertainty is having a compounding and debilitating effect on our communities.

Peter Dwyer

Mayor