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Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Regional Australia  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
Submitted via: ra.reps@aph.gov.au

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### **Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia (the Inquiry)**

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the potential impacts of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan on regional Australia.

#### **Context**

Birds Australia and Bird Observation & Conservation Australia (BOCA) are national non-government organizations with more than 10,000 members throughout Australia. Our joint primary objectives are to conserve and protect Australia's native birds and their habitats. Birds Australia and BOCA promote appreciation of and education about Australia's birds, and we represent our respective members' interests in enjoying and protecting Australia's birds.

Birds Australia and BOCA believe that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) is to be commended for undertaking a thorough assessment of the environmental condition of the rivers, wetlands and floodplains of the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB). The *Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan* (the Guide) clearly outlines the very poor environmental condition of the water-dependent ecosystems of the MDB and recognises the imperative to significantly increase the allocation of water to the environment through the establishment of long-term, sustainable diversion limits (SDLs). We note that there is broad bipartisan political support for addressing the chronic problems besetting the MDB which reflects the concern of all Australians about the health of the MDB and the need to take action for all who depend on it. Action to address the serious problems afflicting the MDB clearly need to reflect a holistic system-wide approach that will include actions addressing environmental, social and economic concerns. These are mutually dependent if we are to repair years of damage through over-extraction of water from the system and achieve a healthy riverine system that will benefit both biodiversity and human-related uses of the MDB into the future.

Birds Australia and BOCA believe that the MDBA has used the best available science to assess the current status of waterbirds in the MDB. The Guide accurately portrays the ongoing impact of reduced flows and altered flooding regimes on the health and productivity of water-dependent ecosystems throughout the MDB. As a direct result, waterbird populations have suffered a massive collapse in numbers, with total waterbird abundance falling by 80% since 1983. Between 1983 and 2006, migratory shorebird populations plunged by 73% and Australia's 15 species of resident shorebirds declined by 81% across south-eastern Australia (Nebel *et al* 2008). Since 1985, populations of many bird species in South Lagoon (Coorong) have declined, including (but not limited to) Black Swan (59%), Fairy Tern (82%), Australian Pelican (77%), Curlew Sandpiper (94%), Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (63%) and Red-necked Stint (68%) (Rogers *et al* 2009). The Guide accurately links declining waterbird populations to the ecological decline of major wetlands throughout the MDB, in particular the large wetlands on the lower reaches of the Condamine-Balonne, Gwydir, Macquarie, Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers. Recovery of waterbird populations in south-eastern Australia will require a coordinated and sustained program to reinvigorate wetlands throughout the MDB.

Birds Australia and BOCA view the development of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan as a great opportunity to address the significant environmental degradation that has occurred within the MDB as a result of over-allocation of water for irrigated agriculture. It provides a unique opportunity to re-establish a healthy riverine system that will produce long-term benefits for all who rely on it including Australia's birds.

### **The Inquiry**

Birds Australia and BOCA seek to comment on the first term of reference of the Inquiry; ie.

### **The direct and indirect impact of the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities, including agricultural industries, local business activity and community wellbeing.**

Birds Australia and BOCA believe that the MDBA has focused on the **short-term**, direct impacts of reduced water availability on regional communities. By placing too great an emphasis on short-term socio-economic impacts, the MDBA has largely ignored the long-term socio-economic and environmental benefits of healthy rivers, wetlands and floodplains. As a result, the MDBA has limited its analysis to SDLs between 3,000 and 4,000 GL/y, levels which represent an unacceptable level of environmental compromise and risk as these will not result in a significant improvement in the health of the water-dependent ecosystems of the MDB and do not adequately allow for climate change. We note that during the severe impacts of the 14 year drought, improvements made by irrigators and other water users in the Basin resulted in a less than 1% decline in the gross value of irrigated agricultural production. Far greater reductions were therefore effectively managed by the irrigated agricultural sector during the drought than would be required through the recommended reductions under the MDBA plan. We also note that the improved performance by the irrigated agricultural sector has not been given the recognition it deserves.

The MDBA has not fully assessed the economic value of the environmental benefits of increased water allocation to the environment. The one study of the environmental benefits focused on the economic benefits of improvements in five attributes: recreation, healthy native vegetation, native fish, frequency of waterbird breeding and waterbirds and other species (Morrison *et al* 2010). The Guide has not assessed the economic benefits of a healthier environment in terms of increased agricultural production through improved ecosystem services (for example, the role of birds in pest control). It has also failed to put a cost

on the 'business-as-usual' scenario, in which ongoing degradation of MDB rivers, wetlands and floodplains would lead to ongoing declines in revenue from agricultural production and tourism, locking regional communities into a downward spiral of environmental and socio-economic decline.

**It is imperative the proposed MDB Plan includes a full assessment of the long-term ecological and economic benefits of SDLs between 3,000 and 7,600 GL/y, including the value of a healthy MDB to both those in the Murray Darling and to the broader Australian community.**

#### **Value of a healthy MDB to the birding community**

The birding community places a high value on healthy ecosystems. Birders frequently travel to iconic sites throughout the MDB, often travelling long distances, spending significant amounts of money and supporting numerous regional communities along the way. However, our members regularly report their despair over the decline of ecosystems throughout the MDB; particularly sites that have degraded significantly within their lifetimes such as the Macquarie Marshes, Menindee Lakes and the Coorong. Once sites become degraded, birders no longer visit them, contributing to a decline in the tourism industry and economic returns to regional communities.

#### **Support for regional communities**

For some regional communities, the short-term socio-economic impacts of implementing the MDB Plan will be difficult. Birds Australia and BOCA support the development of government-funded structural adjustment packages to support these communities as they adapt to new water sharing arrangements. It is imperative that the final MDB Plan is developed in consultation with regional communities, to provide regional communities with blueprints and funding to build healthy, vibrant and above-all, **sustainable** economies.

Birds Australia and BOCA appreciate the opportunity to participate in this Parliamentary Inquiry and would welcome the opportunity to discuss the information provided in this submission. If you have any queries in relation to this submission, please contact

Yours sincerely,

Alison Russell-French  
President, Birds Australia

John Barkla  
President, BOCA

## References

Morrison , M. and Hatton MacDonald, D. (2010) *Economic valuation of environmental benefits in the Murray-Darling Basin*. Report prepared for the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

Nebel, S., Porter, J. L. and Kingsford, R. T. (2008) *Long-term trends of shorebird populations in eastern Australia and impacts of freshwater extraction*. *Biological Conservation* 141: 971-980.

Rogers, D. J. and Paton, D. C. (2009) *Spatiotemporal variation in the waterbird communities of the Coorong*. CSIRO: Water for a Healthy Country National Research Flagship, Canberra.