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Robinvale & District Table Grape Growers Association
PO Box 516
ROBINVALE VIC 3549

16 December 2010

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Regional Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Secretary,

**Re: Impact of the Murray – Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia
Robinvale / Euston District**

This communication is on behalf of the committee and members of the Robinvale and District Table Grape Growers Association, all of whom are table grape producers in the Robinvale/Euston area.

Our district is part of Sunraysia, the largest table grape growing region in Australia. The Sunraysia region exists because of its unique irrigated and dry land horticultural industries. Without these strong industries this region would not be the vibrant agricultural and commercial hub that it is.

Our towns have suffered ten years of drought. Through hard work and good management by our district's table grape producers we have been able to play by the rules, as our allocations were cut and water policies changed. Our industry has been able to adapt and continue farming, but not without loss and hardship along the way. In years of low allocation, our farmers needed to buy additional water at highly inflated prices. With lower allocations some crop quality was compromised resulting in poorer returns for growers. Most of what we went through is part and parcel of the year to year challenges every farmer in every industry faces with changing weather conditions and commodity prices. But we feel that the impact of the Murray Darling Basin Plan would be too great for our district to absorb without grave consequences.

In Robinvale & Euston, the life blood of the town is the industries that support it: table grapes, grain farming, almonds, olives, wine grapes, carrots and other vegetable crops. Without these industries, these two towns would not exist. As stated previously our farmers have been able to get through the last ten years of drought with few casualties. But we feel that one of the casualties has been our town. Through less disposable income generated by our local industries, we have seen many retailers in our town forced to shut or contemplating selling their business due to the down turn. We fear that with more cuts to farmers' water resources, that it may be the final nail in the coffin for many retailers in the district.

We believe that our industries are among the best when it comes to water efficiency and innovation, and the confidence in our district's ability to continue with that is the fact that millions have been spent in the last six years to upgrade water delivery infrastructure, both in Robinvale and Euston. Ten years ago the Euston area upgraded

from an inefficient open channel system to a five million dollar high pressure system. Last year Robinvale commissioned a seventy million dollar high pressure system, replacing a sixty year old leaking, low pressure delivery system.

Every grower who takes a Government buy back offer or any loss of land production that this district sees will have direct implications on the social and economic fabric of the towns. In light of the fact that both towns' irrigation systems are partially being paid off through grower contributions, it will force these repayment fees to increase significantly if there are less growers contributing to the cost of the infrastructure and maintenance.

Robinvale was established for the purpose of giving our returned soldiers an opportunity to start a new life. Through the soldier settlement scheme, the government of the day gave returned servicemen the opportunity to take up land. This gave many a new start in life. Some years later the towns played host to immigrants who came here in the 1950's to look for a better life in 'the lucky country', as we knew it. Fast forward 50 years and our district here in Robinvale and Euston is truly unique, in that we are able to retain the majority of our young farmers in our industries. They have the confidence in the towns and their industries to know that they can make a good living on the farm. This is something that isn't seen as often in other country towns that are industry based. Taking away water through the Darling Basin Plan will strip that confidence from these young Australians and will force them out of the town

Australia prides itself in being a land of opportunity where if you work hard nothing is impossible. The removal of vital resources will strip us of our ability, as farmers to survive and thrive in our business. We believe that now is the right time to drought proof the Murray Darling Basin. But doing it through water cut backs to growers will go against what has made the farming sector as resilient and strong as it has been for generations. We, as a country, should be looking at innovative ways to grow our industries to feed the world with the clean and green food for which we are renowned; not by taking away resources that will shrink our industries to the point where we are insignificant on the world stage. Farmers care for the environment, far more than they are given credit for. Without a sustainable environment, we will not have a place to farm. The last ten years have taught us, as growers, how to be smarter and more innovative. We have been forced to grow through significant adversity.

The Murray Darling Basin has just weathered the worst 10 years of drought on record, during which time both farmers and the environment were able to access water only when it was available. We would like the well being of people and communities in the Murray Darling Basin to be considered as a priority before any recommendations in the Murray Darling Basin Plan are enacted, and for the government to consider making more resources available through new infrastructure rather than trying to limit the use of the resources we have.

We would like to make a representative of the Robinvale and District Table Grape Growers Association available as a witness for the Parliamentary Committee hearings to answer any further questions it may have on this subject.

Yours sincerely,



Fred Tassone

Chairperson
Robinvale & District Table Grape Growers Association