Submission Number: 04
Date Received: 14/06/2012

SC

Regional Development Australia
NORTHERN INLAND NSW

Inquiry into certain matters relating to the proposed Murray-Darling Basin plan

Submission by Regional Development Australia – Northern Inland (RDANI)

This submission relates specifically to the following Terms of Reference: "The potential role that new environmental works and measures projects could play in partially offsetting SDL reductions under the Basin Plan, focussing particularly on prospective project proposals identified by state governments and community interests".

The Situation for Northern Inland NSW

The recently released 'Revised Basin Plan' seeks to recover an unspecified share of 143GL for downstream environments plus 13GL of water for local environments from the Namoi and Border River catchments.

Additional water recovery from the Gwydir catchment is not required, due to the high level of Commonwealth water buyback that has already occurred (108GL).

As stated in the Basin Plan, it is proposed that water efficiency improvements and service benefits for Northern Inland NSW be implemented through a smarter process that combines all efficiency measures collectively, and with enhanced community engagement through local solutions, to avoid any reduction in the region's economic consumptive pool.

Although not well articulated in current communications, the Basin Plan SDL review provides a process for regional communities to maximise our river valley benefits through to 2015 with implementation prior to SDLs for all rivers valleys which come into effect in 2019. This is without impacting on the economic prosperity of the region and protecting, if not providing greater water efficiency benefits, to the environment and basin through an integrated river valleys approach rather than simple but blunt non – infrastructure based recovery through water purchase and *ad hoc* metering which has been proposed to date.

A Better Approach –Smart Water Recovery

Water buy-back is a blunt, economically damaging and politically expedient tool for securing more environmental water. It should not be used in this region, particularly when the contribution of that water to the downstream environment is questionable given the nature of connectivity, the Barwon-Darling system and Menindee Lakes.

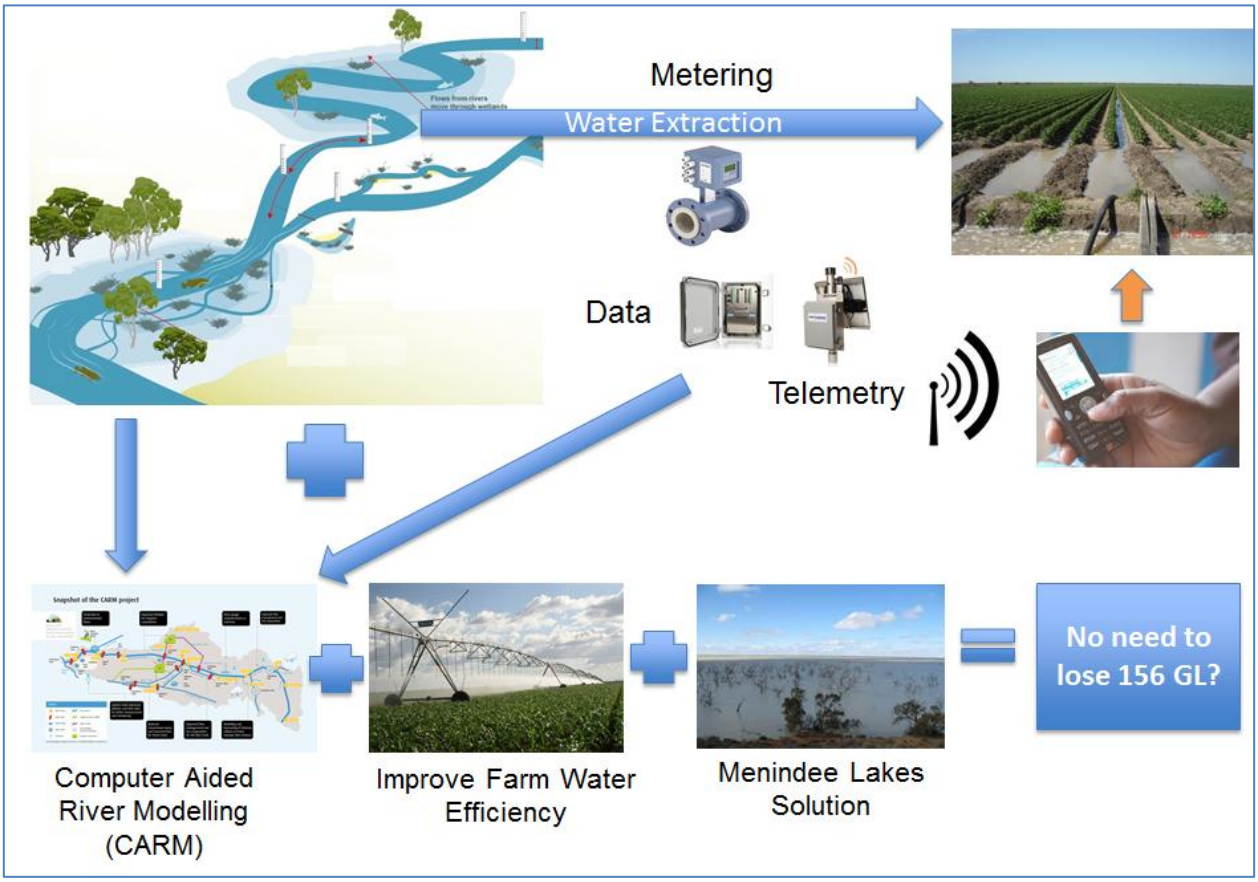
Rather than finding additional environmental water by reducing irrigation water entitlements, a better approach is to generate water savings through smart water recovery in river valleys.

$708 million has been committed to NSW State Priority water saving initiatives under the Commonwealth Sustainable Rural Water Use & Infrastructure Program (SRWUIP). This program has $220 million alone ear-marked for NSW-wide metering upgrades – a program which irrigators have rejected as being poor value for money in the absence of telemetry and taking a whole of system approach to water resource management for all users including the environment.

A whole of system approach for smarter water recovery is outlined in Figure 1 and would include several elements:

- Improved metering;
- Telemetry to supply real-time data;
- Genuine reform of river operations;
- The tools to help improve on-farm water use efficiency;
- More efficient and effective use of environmental water;
- Opportunity to review/improve water access rules with the future review of Water Sharing Plans for the northern rivers;
- Dealing with the Menindee lakes water loss issue.

Figure 1. A Smarter Approach to Works and Measures Investment in the Northern Basin



The starting point for this process is the use of the Computer Aided River Modelling (CARM) software, to identify where the most cost-effective water efficiency improvements can be found in the system. In the absence of this modelling, we are likely to get *ad- hoc* suggestions regarding infrastructure works.

CARM will also identify modifications to river operations which will save water, perhaps without the need for additional infrastructure investments.

The addition of telemetry to the roll-out of new meters would provide landholders with the capacity to monitor and manage their irrigation systems remotely. This would lead to additional water savings.

Northern Inland stakeholders have expressed concern about giving up water for the downstream environment if the majority of that water will be lost through evaporation and seepage at Menindee Lakes. This is an issue which must be addressed to secure local support for any water-saving proposals.

Conclusion

Stakeholders in Northern Inland NSW have expressed a strong preference for environmental works and measures projects to secure additional environmental water, rather than water buy-backs. The technology exists (CARM + telemetry) to ensure those works and measures represent the best options for water recovery and are based upon sound hydrological modelling, rather than untested infrastructure proposals.

Local knowledge combined with river modelling represents a powerful tool which can be used to minimise the loss of productive water in our region and the subsequent negative socio-economic impacts.