

SUBMISSION NO. 3

Secretary: ... *Alben* ...

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FISHERIES AND FORESTRY
AND FORESTRY

Submission to Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Inquiry into future water supplies for Australia

Though water is essentially a State responsibility the role of the Commonwealth has assumed an overriding influence since the CoAG meetings on water policy.

As the Commonwealth has assumed financial responsibility for implementing Competition policy it has become a defacto partner with the States in the implications of all water policy.

In many aspects of policy implementation State decisions are made on state political considerations ignoring the wider community responsibilities for the good of the Nation in the long run. This is where the Commonwealth should take a strong overall policy position.

Many decisions in the past were made in good faith and on the available information and to meet political needs at that time. With hindsight we know that mistakes were made. Current policy is to mitigate the damage done but with minor administrative changes to continue with the overall policies. To do otherwise would create major political reverberations of a social and economic kind.

It is now widely recognized that much irrigation development was promoted in areas now known to be unsuitable for many reasons, particularly salinity. Though current data is inadequate it is generally known what soil types and areas are saline and what areas have virtually no salinity.

For a range of geological reasons saline prone areas can be identified. Put over simply it is clear, not only in Australia but in many other countries [Pakistan, Iraq, Egypt etc.] that river deltas and areas under the sea in recent geological times are likely to be more saline than areas of the upper reaches of the same major river systems. These lower river flats are also easily and cheaply irrigated and are naturally exploited first. When irremediable damage is done development moves up stream where there is less salinity. In the long term the same will inevitably happen in Australia.

It is cheap to irrigate the wide lower floors of river systems. To irrigate the safer areas where the river is narrower and at a higher altitude and less likely to have been under the sea in recent times, is more costly in the short term. If environmental damage is factored in for the long term the economics are different.

What is needed now is a complete reappraisal of where irrigation should occur for the long term benefit of Australia. Major areas should be shut down and other areas, known to be safe, should be developed. Current policy not only makes this uneconomic but is actively prohibited by legislation.

The salinity levels of the Murray are regularly in the news. It is aimed to keep the levels below 350 at Mildura and 600 at Morgan. In Victoria new developments subsidized by the Victorian Government acknowledge that these standards cannot be met.[See the Feasibility study for the Deakin Project.]

At the same time salinity levels in the upper tributaries of the Murray are for example 40 for the Kiewa and 60 for the Ovens as they enter the Murray. In these upper valleys there are major areas suitable for irrigation but no water is legally available as it is all marked for sale in the lower reaches.

A recent study by the Victorian Department of Agriculture identified in the Murray valley above Lake Hume 19334 ha as highly suitable for horticulture. Crop water requirements were 67 671 ML but only 3495 ML was available. Legislative restrictions make it extremely unlikely that more water will be made available. This is but one of many examples that exist to indicate that there are options for development in an environmentally sensitive manner.

Much more could be written or explained but it was thought that a "one pager" might be read whereas a full submission would be passed over. Having been on similar committees to review policy I know what a difficult task it is and I thank you for your involvement in what is one of the major policy issues for Australia.

Paul McGowan
"Camellia Cottage"
RMB 2068, Indigo Creek Road,
Barnawartha Vic 3688
pmcgowan@albury.net.au