

Dissenting Report

Senator Nick Xenophon

1.1 I commend my colleague, Senator John Madigan, for being the primary driver of this inquiry being established – a review of the Murray Darling Basin Plan is of course welcome – given the incredible importance of the basin to the nation’s environmental health and economic wealth.

1.2 However, I cannot support many recommendations in the Chair’s report; in particular recommendations 12, 13, 14 and 21 are most problematic.

1.3 The basin plan evolved across a number of years under both Coalition and ALP Governments. It is not perfect, but the perfect should not be the enemy of the good.

1.4 I am a strong supporter of farming communities in my home State of South Australia. Those communities that rely on irrigation water from the Murray deserve both certainty and a healthy river system from which to draw their water. Environmental flows are essential to maintain the health of the river, both in terms of salinity and blue green algae, for instance.

1.5 The recommendations in the Chair’s report that discuss moving barrages, allowing ingress of salt water into the lake and an additional lock above lake Alexandrina would have disastrous environmental and social consequences for the lower regions of the Murray.

1.6 I note the submission of Professor Mike Young of the University of Adelaide to this Inquiry. He drew attention to the difference between “gross” take and “net” water use. He stated in his submission:

Investment in measures that improve the efficiency of water use makes sense IF AND ONLY IF this results in an increase in the “net” efficiency of water use. In particular, full account needs to be taken of the quantities of water that following irrigation pass through a root zone to an aquifer and/or drain back to a river.¹

1.7 There have been recent developments in respect of the MDBP that ought to be noted.

1.8 On 11 March 2016 the Murray Darling Basin Ministerial Council met in Melbourne to discuss how to progress the implementation of the Basin Plan.

1.9 A core aspect to the plan is the sustainable diversion limit (SDL) adjustment mechanism. The SDL adjustment mechanism is a key process for improving the socio-economic and environmental outcomes of the Basin Plan. During the meeting Ministers discussed the projects state governments are developing to implement the

1 Professor Michael Young, *Submission 348*, p. 1.

Plan, including supply measures. These are measures that deliver equivalent environmental outcomes using less water and are commonly referred to as ‘down water’ projects.

1.10 The projects accepted under the plan are backed by science and by protocols as to how that science is to be implemented. However, I understand there are concerns some states are developing down water projects which they claim will achieve environmentally equivalent outcomes, but these projects are not adhering to the scientific basis and protocols previously agreed to.

1.11 It is particularly important for South Australia’s river system that upstream states meet their end of the bargain when it comes to upholding the Murray Darling Basin Plan. Each of the states that are party to the plan set these rules. It was done so by consensus, based on the science and must not be undone.

1.12 Finally, of course, the plan must be subject to regular and robust scrutiny. However to undo the plan, as a number of the recommendations suggest, would be retrograde step – destructive to both the farmers and the environment.

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