

**Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's national parks,  
conservation reserves and marine protected areas**

**Private landholders experiences in managing the Lower  
Gwydir Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar site)**



**This submission made by:**

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On 2 February 1999 (World Wetlands Day), we stood together with Senator Robert Hill (then Federal Environment Minister), the Hon Pam Allen (then NSW Environment Minister), the Hon Richard Amery (then NSW Minister for Land and Water Conservation) and representatives of WWF Australia and the National Parks Association, and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for future cooperation with the management of our portion of the Lower Gwydir Wetland of International Importance. This was described by many as a landmark day. Private landholders seeking to have the special wetland values of their properties preserved by having them recognised as Wetlands of International Importance. A showcase of the Ramsar Convention's 'wise use' principle; a win-win situation, globally important wetlands being conserved in conjunction with commercial cattle grazing.

In the afterglow of that photo-opportunity the reality wasn't quite what was written on paper and it quickly emerged that despite the MoU, nothing much would change. Water would continue to be allocated or diverted up-stream, less and less making it to the Lower Gwydir, and the condition of our now Ramsar-listed wetland would continue to decline. With this lack of water on the floodplain, *Lippia* weed would progressively invade and out-compete the natural fodder upon which the viability of our grazing operations depends. The MoU contained the words, "Both Governments remain committed to maintaining appropriate hydrological regimes in the Gingham and Lower Gwydir Watercourses, particularly the provision of adequate, ecologically appropriate environmental flows to the wetlands.". These have proven so far to be hollow words.

It took nearly four years before the governments that were so keen to sign the MoU heard our cries for help. To his credit the NSW Environment Minister, Bob Debus, established the NSW Ramsar Managers Network, specifically to give us (and the other private Ramsar site managers in the state) the opportunity for face-to-face contact with the relevant government officials, both federal and state, so that our site management needs could be addressed expeditiously. The RMN had its first meeting in November 2003 and the list of issues and concerns aired by the private Ramsar site managers at that

meeting tells a lot about government performance in supporting us up to that point. This list of 'grievances' was as follows:

- No recognition of Ramsar [sites] in Water Sharing Plans;
- [Catchment] Blueprints do not give priority to wetland actions;
- Influence of irrigation industry on water sharing decision makers [is too great];
- Lack of awareness and commitment at high Government level;
- Lack of staff committed to Ramsar at State and Commonwealth levels;
- Poor communication- between and within Government agencies and between Government and landholders;
- Mismatch between commitment (legislation and policy) and action (management) relating to environmental flows;
- Lack of funding for management of Ramsar sites;
- Lack of assistance in managing on-ground issues e.g. weeds;
- Lack of recognition by the general public and Government about what Ramsar is;
- Despondency of Ramsar managers.

The RMN then set about addressing these concerns, or at least some of them. Minister Debus, and the head of his Department (Lisa Corbyn), have supported the process strongly and at the first of our (bi-annual) meetings he attended he gave us a public apology for the failures of the NSW Government in fulfilling their commitments under the MoU. The Commonwealth has not followed suit.

After he visited our Ramsar site, Minister Debus fought hard (we understand) to secure funds through the NSW budget for the Riverbank program and the Wetlands Recovery Plan; both of which we are now told will solve our problems. While we would like to believe this to be true, we are not holding our breath! To us it seems that so far only Minister Debus and Lisa Corbyn are taking their responsibilities seriously, and want to meet the commitments given in our MoU. Regrettably, there are still strong signals that neither the NSW Minister for Natural Resources (who has control over rural water in the state), the Federal Minister of Environment and Heritage, and their respective departments, are not taking this matter seriously. Federal bureaucrats use the Federation to pass the buck to the state and the NSW Minister for Natural Resources is seemingly not interested. It does make us wonder why the Federal Government introduced the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, with its 'Ramsar trigger', if the same government now conveniently says that water management is a state issue and it can't help. Surely the buck stops with the Federal Environment Minister and to date he has been missing in action.

The current situation is that we continue to be told to be patient (6.5 years later!) and that the Riverbank program and the Wetlands Recovery Plan will solve our issues. Against this backdrop, the RMN commissioned a detailed assessment of the ecological character of our site in late 2005 and it confirms our view that the site has been significantly and detrimentally altered by the combination of reduced flows and invasion by the weeds *Lippia* and Water Hyacinth. The RMN also commissioned (in May 2006) an independent review

of the performance of itself to date. That review (available upon request) highlighted in particular our view that so far only one of the three Ministers (and their departments) that need to be involved is taking these matters seriously.

Reflecting on this sorry tale, we felt the need to pass on our experiences to you to help inform your inquiry. Ramsar listing has been for us a nightmare. It has cost us time, resources and heartache. We saw ourselves as responsible landowners that took a landmark step toward a new paradigm for Australia where grazing and wetland conservation could be seen as compatible, not as enemies. While we remain committed to that vision, it is clear to us now that the Governments (both NSW and Federal) of this country are unable, at this time at least, to support us in pursuing that vision.

Our frustration boiled over at the most recent meeting of the RMN (in May 2006) when we tabled a list of requests that some government bureaucrats have labeled as 'demands'. These we have provided below so you can see that we now feel there is no option but to be very direct and clear in what we believe is needed to start to put our Ramsar management experience back on track. We also felt the need to set firm deadlines for action, tired of being told to 'be patient'. If the governments that signed our MoU had been vigilant in meeting their commitments, it would not require us to have to table such a list of requests. To then have them labeled as 'demands' by the very people that should have been helping us, is insulting to say the least.

"WE WANT AS THE PRIVATE RAMSAR MANAGERS NETWORK  
ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARANCY.....NOT SMOKE AND MIRRORS  
AND OUR DEADLINE TO RECEIVE THIS IS ON OR BEFORE SEPT.1ST 2006.

[OUR REQUESTS ARE AS FOLLOWS]

1. FOR THE FEDERAL ENVIRONMENT MINISTER TO VISIT MACQUARRIE MARSHES AND GWYDIR RAMSAR SITES BEFORE SEPTEMBER 1ST.
2. A WRITTEN REPORT (1 PAGE SUMMARY) ON HOW MUCH WATER RIVERBANK HAS BOUGHT IN THE GWYDIR AND MACQUARRIE MARSH REGIONS....ON SEPTEMBER 1ST AND THEN QUARTERLY.
3. AS ABOVE FOR WETLANDS ACTION PLAN.....HOW HAS IT HELPED EACH OF THE PRIVATE SITES...ON THE GWYDIR AND MACQUARRIE MARSHES...REPORT ON SEPTEMBER 1ST AND THEN QUARTERLY.
4. DEH/DEC/DNR TO ADVISE RMN IN WRITING (BY SEPTEMBER 1ST) THAT THEY HAVE ADVISED THE 4 CMA'S THAT THEY WISH TO BUY RAMSAR 'OUTCOMES' IN THE NEXT ROUND OF INVESTMENTS.
5. MINISTERS-STATE AND FEDERAL TO RESTATE COMITMENTS TO MOU'S IN WRITING AND

I REPEAT SEPT 1ST 2006 IS OUR DEADLINE."

We have also written to the Federal Minister for Environment and Heritage advising of our disappointment with the performance of he and his Department in supporting our management challenges. We are hopeful that he will visit us in the near future to see our sites first-hand and appreciate that Australia should be embarrassed to have allowed them to become what they are today, weed infested and with most of their Ramsar values gone. We wonder how seriously the Minister and his bureaucrats would take us if these were World Heritage properties. Imagine the outcry if Kakadu was allowed to wither up and die due to government failings.

We hope that these insights into our Ramsar experience will help your inquiry. We remain in hope that our list of requests (above) will be met and that this will signal, at long last, full and meaningful engagement and support from Minister Campbell Federally and Minister MacDonald in NSW. Together with that already shown by Minister Debus in NSW, perhaps we will then see the actions that were expected to begin with the signing of the MoU in 1999. In particular, and to re-state it from above, the MoU contained the unequivocal words, "Both Governments remain committed to maintaining appropriate hydrological regimes in the Gingham and Lower Gwydir Watercourses, particularly the provision of adequate, ecologically appropriate environmental flows to the wetlands.". What we need now is for the relevant state and federal Ministers to take this commitment seriously, and to give us an iron-clad guarantee that this water will be provided for our wetlands now and in perpetuity, as is required by the Ramsar Convention and the EPBC Act. If this cannot be done then we will be forced to pursue de-listing of our Ramsar wetlands; something we are advised cannot be done. But, if we don't have a wetland, how can we have a Ramsar site?

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