

2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2005-09-02

Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity

Committee Secretary  
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology  
and the Arts References Committee  
Department of the Senate  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dean and I are Marcollat Landholders along the Marcollat Watercourse. Situated in the Upper South East of SA. The proposed Didicoolum Drain alignment runs through the Marcollat Flat and is part of a program currently completing a network of 650km of groundwater drains aimed at controlling salinity and flooding in the region.

Our family has lived on our property “Kyeema” for 30 years. Our experiences and observations have shown that good land management practices have largely controlled, and in some cases reversed, the impacts of salinity and flooding on our land and neighbouring properties. We question the program’s justification for the drainage network. We believe that encouragement of better land management practices would have been far more beneficial for the region than the drain network.

Our concerns are that the current drain construction program is aimed more at spending \$45 million of public money on a network started about 10 years ago, rather than achieving positive agricultural and environmental outcomes for the region. The network was conceived in 1993 to control salinity and flooding, and circumstances now in the region are substantially different to those predicted then.

There is little evidence that program staff have seriously considered the long-term economic and environmental impacts of the proposed drains on the region. Furthermore, a recent CSIRO report on a proposed drain in the region draws attention to the lack of scientific information on the effects of drainage on native vegetation, on the fresher perched groundwater lens, and on salt loads in the catchment. It seems illogical to commit millions of dollars of public money (federal and state taxpayers, and landholder levies) on groundwater drains when there are so many unknowns.

The region has experienced declining rainfall since the mid-1900’s, which CSIRO predicts will continue for at least another 50 years. No studies have been conducted to determine the likely effect of declining rainfall on groundwater levels, which have been generally falling in the region since 1993.

We are concerned that the drains currently under construction will harm soils and wetlands (effects reported by CSIRO), which local landholders will be forced to manage and pay for repairs in the future.

The Scheme needs to differentiate between cleared farming land and wetland-cannot afford to drain the last wetlands. Only two remaining wetlands left in the South East without drains running alongside them.

We believe that minor drains to control surface flooding and replenish wetlands, combined with an extensive revegetation program of recharge areas, and saltland agronomy where necessary on the flats, would have provided considerably more cost-effective salinity and flooding management solutions for the region. Many expert advisors to the program have recommended these solutions, but their favoured solution continues to be based around the more expensive groundwater drain network.

The EIS strongly recommends a “package of measures” to address continuing environmental degradation and loss in productivity.

Property management planning was considered a first step in order to identify the different land classes with different management options developed for the different classes. It suggests that sandy rises be planted and maintained to lucerne by using establishment and grazing management strategies and salt tolerant species sown on salt effected flats and managed to provide adequate ground cover over summer.

Revegetation with native species on less productive land is also suggested as well as using perennial pasture that will boost the farm income on the more productive areas of farms. Revegetation has been hailed as a sound medium to long- term option to drainage in the EIS but has not been given any credence by Michael Leak and Andrew Johnson as to its benefit on the Marcollat Flat. The EIS supplement clearly states that “Detailed development of the revegetation program should be carried out as part of the detailed design stage of the project and should include appropriate incentive to encourage implementation” Revegetation has not been mentioned and we can only conclude that the EIS recommendations have not been included in the proposed drain design. In deed, of the 12 Design Criteria presented at the March meeting, none included revegetation.

We have received \$110,000 funding from SENRCC and put in \$110,000 of our own money to plant over a million trees. 70ha of revegetation to ensure water levels don't rise by controlling the recharge. We continue to be actively planting and renovating to ensure our country remains healthy and to ensure we don't have any salinity issues. The perennial pastures and trees acting as natural water pumps and achieving the same results as a intrusive drain. **NOTHING GROWING, NO WATER USAGE.** Neighbours have also taken up the same revegetation programs.

It is land use practice that needs to be reassessed and we question whether the marginal nature of the land particularly the old watercourse country and the fact that the drain will effect only two paddocks on one property warrants such a large capitol expense. In the deliberations to this drainage proposal have all these EIS measures been considered? We think not.

At a recent meeting we were informed that an Upper South East agronomist had been appointed to the Program Board to represent the landholders. We had never met Jock McFarlane before and he has never put foot on our property, but he proceeded to make commented about the impacts of a drain on our property.

The Marcollat Flat has a very valuable fresh water lens, which sits on the top of the groundwater table. This freshwater lens combined with porous limestone soils forms a very productive agricultural area. Water measuring between 1500 to 2000 parts per million can be pumped from a depth of 10 feet and used for irrigation purposes. The drainage proposal puts at risk this precious resource, which could be lost forever.

All landowners along the Marcollat and West Avenue Watercourses with proposed drainage alignments have been looked at in isolation by the program staff. As a result areas have been segregated. As we are only kilometres apart we feel that all areas should be looked at in the big picture rather than in isolation. There are only 5% of wetlands left in the South East of SA

Recently we have been informed by Michael Leak from the USE Program Board that REM have been commissioned to compile a report from slug tests along the Marcollat Watercourse. This report will provide information on the affects of drainage on the flats. We were appalled by this decision as REM has an historical alliance with Willalooka Station, who are pushing for a two metre deep drain. Also REM has represented Tom Hanson, who also wants a two metre deep drain, at a recent landholder meeting with Program Staff. We objected strongly to Michael Leak, stating that this process risks severe bias. Mr Leak replied that another hydrology company had been approached, but they were unable to complete the report within the time frame required

Andrew Johnson states that we have a rising groundwater table, which is incorrect based on modelling by CSIRO and a decision has to be made soon, as time is running out. ( Legislation which allowed to compulsory acquisition of land will end June, 2006) Michael Leak has stated and showed details of Obswell data that the water tables have been receding for the past 10 years.

There has not been a cost/benefit analysis done for the Marcollat Flat.

After six years of asking for a report to be compiled on the effects of drainage through the flat on wetlands, agriculture and irrigation we finally received three independent reports on soils, hydrology and agronomy. All agreeing that a two metre deep drain through the flat would be detrimental.

We have no confidence in the Program Board. Incorrect information is continually being brought forward, with little respect for knowledge from landholders who have lived in the area for between 30-70 years.

The fact that Mr Wicks has promised anaesthetically pleasing banks to complement the preferred 1.5-1.8 metre deep drain option does not fill one with confidence. As we visualise the scaring and erosion of the implementation of the drainage scheme in the Northern Catchment.

Many landholders, like our selves, and government public servants have serious concerns over the direction of the current program.

This document is supported by the following landholders who endorse all the information stated.

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