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Nat. Water  
Initiatives Inquiry

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### Water Budget Report 10.05.2006

So far I have had a very disappointing response from governments both to my previous reports & to my expressed environmental concerns & so consequently the terrible (legal) destruction of the sensitive countryside on the flood irrigation farm nearby, continues on regardless. And the alarming collapse of kilometers of fragile Gwydir river banks upstream of the Tareelaro weir escalates daily as more & more regulated waters are continually released from Copeton dam regardless of the wretched (documented) destruction these regulated waters are causing to the environment, my beautiful property & others.

It all reflects the awful powerful grip that the water industry & particularly the mighty flood irrigators have over our money driven governments. In my view, Australia's unique habitat & her precious fresh water resources don't stand a chance of remaining sustainable whilst the present craven governments lack the courage to stand up to these unsustainable self interested industries.

I note with interest in the latest Budget that the government thinks that throwing money at the problem will help make up for the losses. It won't solve the problems & unless they stop allowing fresh water to be used for flood irrigation purposes the situation will only further deteriorate, rapidly. The Gwydir River is being used by the water authorities & the flood irrigation industry as a huge regulated irrigation channel & it simply cannot cope.

No amount of money will make our gentle old rivers systems work the way flood irrigation demands & it is unforgivable & I believe quite irresponsible governance to expect money to compensate nature for the terrible losses it continues to endure.

Water laws urgently need to reflect far greater protective policies for our unique environment & our increasingly limited fresh water supplies, irrespective of the expectations of the flood irrigation industry.

Clearly, flood irrigation is an unsustainable industry in our environment. At present, water policies permit the practice of flood irrigation to continue regardless of the risk to our unique natural habitat & our irreplaceable precious fresh water resources.

We all need water to survive & fresh water, especially in Australia is extremely limited & a totally irreplaceable resource. Once these fresh water resources have dried up & the delicate environment is depleted, no amount of money will help any of us.

Thank you for reading my Water Budget report. I believe we all need to keep trying to do whatever we can to save our environment & our precious fresh water resources from unsustainable agricultural practices.

Yours sincerely,

Wendy Bunce

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## **AUSTRALIA – Regulated Flood Irrigation Report**

Regulated Water management of the River water & Groundwater resources, plus the extensive habitat destruction associated with all levels of flood irrigation may mean the industry is simply unsustainable.

For a long time I have been trying to bring attention to a very serious and very personal case of poor water management for flood irrigation causing massive environmental damage. This particularly involves the damage caused to my property and others by the regulated waters of the Tareelaro Weir on the Gwydir River, upstream of Moree in NSW.

I am also concerned at the high levels of land degradation & vegetation lost for flood irrigation purposes generally, in the Gwydir valley. Land clearing for flood irrigation appears to continue largely unaffected, even with recent state legislation purportedly designed to prohibit the loss of our environment.

The massive trouncing of our natural habitat for flood irrigation is not computable, just gone forever. Perhaps future generations may conclude this damage is largely due to lack of common sense & lack of courage to challenge such unsustainable flood irrigation systems as presently exist in this country.

I believe flood irrigation in the driest continent in the world does not work within the confines of our fragile environment. Thus to continue to push our precious water resources to exhaustible levels may be judged negligent by a world increasingly worried about the effects of global warming & climate change.

Sadly, most groundwater & river water policies appear to turn a blind eye to flood irrigation problems generally, even when it is clearly unsustainable. It will take great courage to change & so far our leaders have been slow to stop & think, what are the consequences for the whole community of continuing to exhaust these magnificent water resources? When well over half the worlds population is desperate for clean, safe drinking water, in Australia we blindly carry on allowing a relatively small powerful group of people to trade & flood our precious fresh groundwater & river water onto ancient soil for cash crops.

Lack of responsible environmental governance of regulated resource based industries merely allows those unsustainable businesses to further expand, particularly if the dominant factor for determining policy is money. Thus moonscape environments replace nutrient rich native landscapes & precious ground & river water resources continue to struggle to cope with the unquenchable pressures these greedy industries demand. The short term monetary gains of unsustainable industries generally are nothing compared to the awful legacy of the shattered environment we'll be leaving for our children.

Governments generally, have seemed extremely reluctant to acknowledge or to respond to either the huge environmental damage occurring upstream of the Tareelaroï weir, but also to prevent ongoing widespread destruction of the environment, lost to huge flood irrigation developments on the Gwydir river.

## Background

Please remember that flood irrigation in the Gwydir valley, has only been here since the governments construction of regulatory built structures, such as Copeton dam & the Tareelaroï weir.

Thus the irrigation industry in this area has developed very rapidly in our region, particularly within the last thirty years.

Yet even in such a relatively short period of time, the vast spectrum of destructive environmental changes to the whole ecology of the Gwydir valley, especially upstream of Tareelaroï weir, has been massively manipulated, severely weakened & altered by continuous high volumes of regulated water stored above the weir structure, in order to allow questionable flooding practises to expand.

Our property in particular & the local environment in general, continue to be dramatically changed physically & aesthetically, in order to allow flood irrigation of regulated water for some short term monetary gains.

State-run regulatory water authorities largely developed some thirty years ago, along with the regulatory structures, built at the time. In the 1970's, when the state government of the day, instigated huge structural changes to our natural waterways (i.e., they built the weirs & dams) & they began to store & regulate water within those affected water courses, perhaps then, they did not recognize the catastrophic effects of meddling with nature.

The area of the Gwydir River which flows from Biniguy to Moree is unique. This section is where the slopes level out into the plains of the region known as the North West Slopes & Plains. Most of the fine sedimentary soils in the area are the result of millions of years of intermittent flood waters slowing down as they reach the flatter land & depositing their silt load as they spread out across the plains. The soils of the river banks at Tareelaroï are soft silty cracking loam & are only suitable for the normal low levels of the river, with the occasional short flood and cannot bear the sustained high water levels and regulated flows of recent times. They are totally unsuitable for water storage. They have very poor water-holding capabilities and even heavy downpours of rain rapidly penetrate and disappear.

Mean while, vast areas of our once magnificent, stable & richly diverse, multi-ecological environments are being allowed to be stripped bare & turned into 'huge barren tracts of mono-cultural deserts' strictly controlled by chemicals & heavy machinery & watered by flood inundation of government regulated fresh water for cash crops.

There has always been some minor shifting of the course of the Gwydir River in this area. However this has been accelerated to an alarming rate and level by the construction and unsustainable management practices of the Tareelaroï weir. The course of the river is changing rapidly & dramatically and this has had & is having devastating results on my small property Tareelaroï, on the northern side of the river upstream of the weir. One large area of land was lost some years ago, another similar section is in imminent danger, and many other areas are continually losing large sections of bank, totalling millions of tonnes.

The Gwydir River above the Tareelaroï Weir is being used as a storage area – it is now much wider than ever before. The weir is the first regulatory structure downstream of Copeton, and so bears the full brunt of the regulated river water. The effects are diluted on all other downstream weirs. Tareelaroï weir is expected to store, divide & divert all of the regulated water released from Copeton dam for regulated distribution into five other downstream water ways: The Mehi, the Moomin creek, the Carole creek, the Gil Gil creek plus the Gwydir River downstream. Please remember that most of these downstream creeks were not permanent water ways prior to regulation.

Before the weir's construction, the Gwydir river waters were crystal clear except during brief flood periods (2-3 days max), & generally contained a great variety of ecosystems. The river waters moved slowly along through intermittent sections of deep water holes & other shallower parts with occasional rapids over river stones, gravel & sand, shallow enough for us to regularly drive our family car & ride our horses across it to tend our cattle running on the southern side of the river in an area known as the Junction. This area is so named as it contained the original junction or origin of the Mehi, which arose from a depression in the bank of the Gwydir but which was blocked off when the weir was constructed. The Mehi junction only ever ran water briefly when the river level in the Gwydir rose above a certain height. I believe these creeks were nature's way of taking the pressure off the main stream of the river in brief times of natural floods & that nature never intended them to be used to supply regulated water for flood irrigation.

## Discussion

I believe all aspects of storage, management, release & distribution of regulated water for flood irrigation purposes associated with the Tareelaroï weir on the Gwydir River are unsustainable & destructive.

This is a large & rapidly growing environmental calamity, which will not go away without urgent major action. It is extremely hard to convey the scale of this widespread catastrophe without a personal inspection of the whole area, which I would therefore welcome.

I have been informed that DNR (formerly DIPNR, Dept of Land & Water) is largely responsible for the management of our rivers & weirs & our environment, and thus for this damage. However, I am also informed that State Water is responsible for delivering the regulated water. Tragically, neither government bodies nor the ministers will assume responsibility for the problem.

I have been discussing the matter with DNR for years (including considerable correspondence), but until recently there has been no progress whatsoever. The policy has appeared to be one of doing as little as possible – just wait & see & hope that the problem will disappear.

Some authorities have inspected the damage yet they continue to use delaying tactics by requesting more & more reports of the situation in order to justify their procrastinations. Dr David Outhet, who I believe to be a specialist fluvial geomorphologist, led an inspection last year, and more recently a company named Hassall & Associates was engaged by State water to carry out yet another inspection of the regulated river damage. I am not aware of any proposed plan of action, but have been informed that State Water & DNR are still just studying the cause of this damage (Mr Khan 5/9/05).

Whilst I am aware that land and water management are generally State controlled matters, I very strongly believe that this is a tremendous national loss, and so warrants consideration on a national level. This, plus the very slow reaction time and paucity of action by the NSW Government, has compelled me to also contact members of the Federal Government.

If water management systems continue to prioritize flood irrigation for cash crops, it places an ever increasing strain on our most precious groundwater & river water resources as well as further increasing the tremendous environmental destruction of our magnificent country side.

In light of the massive accelerating environmental damage occurring upstream of the Tareelaro weir & the destruction of vibrant ecosystems within those areas using the regulated flood waters in this region there is also the awful mess & disastrous consequences for those areas downstream of these irrigation regions to consider, because they don't get water any more because it' been trapped for flood irrigation schemes upstream.

All these undesirable consequences are a direct result of regulated interference of natural water courses due to restrictive regulatory structures & widespread general mismanagement of our most precious water resources. Considering the very real possibility that our global climate seems highly likely to become very much hotter & even drier than we have experienced already, I am wondering if there may be a more urgent need for all levels of government & the community to give serious consideration to prohibiting the wasteful practice of using regulated fresh water for flood irrigation purposes in Australia.

## Conclusion

The practice of storing large volumes of regulated water at high levels is unsustainable in this area. I believe the weir has been built in the wrong location or is the wrong design for this location and should be moved or dramatically changed. The challenge now is to not only slow or prevent further destruction, but also to endeavour to repair some of the past and present damage. I have notified State Water and DNR, that to continue in the present manner would be to show disregard for the resultant damage, especially following my extensive representation on the subject.

The situation is extremely serious but sadly it seems that whilst ever continuous pumping for flood irrigation is encouraged, the fragile environment & the natural fresh water resources in the state of NSW will be at risk.

Sitting here at Tareelaro, as I write this report today, I can hear the droning sound of earth moving machines working away on a nearby irrigation farm. Huge scrapers stripping away layer upon layer of beautiful organically rich, silting soil, flattened & made level for yet another vast desolated mono-cultural field, readied to accommodate flood irrigation using regulated fresh water from the Gwydir River & the Lower Gwydir groundwater resources.

To date, state government leaders generally have lacked the courage or the conviction to change, thus these unspeakably damaging, regulatory water practices have continued to expand for the highly questionable benefit of an environmentally unsustainable industry which at best, offers little more than some short term monetary gains for a privileged few.

I believe the Australian community is appalled & disappointed that flood irrigation continues to dominate water regulation policy & our environment. It is high time priority was given to abandoning the current methods of flood inundation using fresh water. Our country cannot cope with flood irrigation & regulations need to reflect that & act to protect our environment & our fresh water resources before it is too late.

I have included with this letter (below) copy of a small speech I made recently at a meeting held by the Border Rivers – Gwydir, Catchment Management Authority (CMA) at the Moree Services Club.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter.

Yours sincerely,

Wendy Bunce

Groundwater meeting, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2006

Remembering that well over half of the world's population **does NOT have safe fresh drinking water.**

**Groundwater IS our most precious global resource.**

There is widespread community belief that the practice of continuously pumping water from the ground water resource to flood-irrigate cash crops is the biggest threat to the resource.

Considering the very real possibility that our global climate is likely to get even hotter & dryer than we have experienced already. I am wondering if the members of the GVIA association would please consider **voluntarily** stopping the practice of using groundwater for flood irrigation?

I am aware that this is a very difficult decision, but I also believe to do so voluntarily, would show the world that our irrigation industry does care about the environment & that it is an industry prepared to limit expenditure in order to work within the confines of sustainable farming practice.

The government's monetary compensation for forced reductions of groundwater allocations isn't huge.

But the reward for the environment for voluntarily agreeing to stop pumping groundwater for flood irrigation would be enormous.

By voluntarily removing the enormous strain of continuously pumping water from the groundwater reservoir for flood irrigation, we could secure the resource for future generations & be justly proud of ourselves & our industry.

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### **Flood Irrigation Summary 01.05.06**

I believe there has been no real recognition ever given to the fact that Australia is one of the oldest (& driest) continents on Earth. It is my belief that our country can only support farming practices that are 'slow & steady' in nature & are harmoniously synchronized to work within the fragile confines of our old environment & our increasingly limited fresh water supplies.

Flood irrigation of cash crops using fresh water is a 'fast & unsteady' form of agriculture & it does not work in a synchronized manner with our precious ancient land & water resources.

Incredibly, broad scale clearing & massive land manipulation of our natural habitat continues with government support for flood irrigation.

The Gwydir River was once a stable, clear, sleepy old stream & the vast local environment of the Gwydir Valley was once secure & contained a rich diversity of plants & animals.

However, since the construction of Copeton dam & the Tareelaro weir & regulator & with the introduction of regulation using fresh water for flood inundation of cash crops from water stored in Copeton dam, this region is being systematically annihilated.

Many water agencies seem unwilling to recognize the catastrophic impacts of such horrendous activities, let alone be prepared to stand up to try to stop the wasteful use of fresh water for flood irrigation.

Fresh water is something that we all depend on for life.

The environment in the Gwydir Valley has taken millions & millions of years to evolve, yet the government is continuing to allow the water industry to dictate policies which permit the unsustainable flood irrigation industry to flourish, regardless of the negative impacts on our old & fragile environment.

The Gwydir River & the Lower Gwydir groundwater resources are under increasing pressure. The local environment is being radically altered & trading fresh water is only adding to the complexity of the problem.

I am making a very strong stand against such unsustainable practices because I believe that if we ignore these vitally important issues, the future of all life on our continent may be at risk. I would therefore appreciate some support in helping the government & our community to recognize the hugely negative impacts of continuing to use fresh water for flood inundation of cash crops.

Yours sincerely,

Wendy Bunce



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**Review of Fresh Water Trading in Australia – 10.04.06**

The trouble with any decision that makes something as precious as fresh water into a tradable resource & thus makes it available for purchase to the highest bidder is that it assumes water is a commodity much like gold, silver or diamonds.

To encourage water trading generally is to make the monetary value of water much more important than the life dependant value of it. Fresh water is not like any other resource. It is truly unique & all life on earth is dependant on it. Trading the irreplaceable resource gives a sense of ownership to water buyers which in my view may lead to a situation where money could control life.

I believe water trading may also add huge negative environmental influence to the sustainability of the precious resource.

Surface & ancient groundwater resources are essential for life. Every thing & every one in Australia is totally dependant on it. I believe any market value decisions which have the potential to influence the supply & availability of fresh water generally may be very dangerous to us all.

Along with the tremendous environmental damage associated with allowing fresh water for flood irrigation purposes, the decision to encourage fresh water trading is yet another example of general asinine governance.

Thank you taking the time to read my review.

Yours sincerely,

Wendy Bunce