SUBMISSION TO SENATE AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO WATER POLICY INITITIVES

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1. Introduction

The Chinchilla and District Water Users Association Inc. represents irrigators utilising the Chinchilla Weir on the Condamine River and others in the Chinchilla district with overland flow and river water harvesting licences.

2. Restraint from Governments

We commend the Senate for having this enquiry to gather information about the progress of the WPI and suggest that restraint should be exercised by all governments in any legislative reforms. They should lead industry with incentive programmes and R & D assistance rather than enforcing legislation with compliance officers.

3. Cost Burden

The implementation of the NWI in Queensland is resulting in a significant cost burden on irrigators. The Water Tax imposed by the Queensland Government, the costs of Land and Water Management Plans and the costs of installing meters on previously unmetered flows are weighing heavily on an industry already suffering from reduced terms of trade. We are being asked to be more efficient and at the same time being asked to contribute to the cost of bureaucratic controls.

These extra costs are on top of the normal 'farmers' costs of irrigation, which are also increasing. Infrastructure, maintenance and pumping costs have all increased dramatically in recent years, resulting in water costing farmers a considerable amount of money by the time it is applied to the irrigation field.

4. Land and Water Management Plans

While we support the principal of developing sustainable Land and Water Management Plans, multiple triggers being applied by DNR in Queensland to require a plan to be prepared, and the enormous amount of detail required in these plans, amounts to over-regulation and unnecessary expense.

By over regulating these plans, the DNR is virtually taking over the design and management of our farms. This is a dangerous practice for the long-term viability of agriculture, as it will stifle innovation and change by not allowing farmers to experiment or think outside the square (created by DNR).

5. Reductions in Irrigation allocations at Chinchilla

Chinchilla Weir is a small scheme, which has been operating for over 30 years on a large river, utilising less than 1% of the annual river flow. Recently, when the ROP was reassessed by DNR, the operating rules that had existed for 30 years were changed. The effect of this was to reduce the amount and reliability of water available to us by increasing the environmental flows.

There is concern by irrigators on the Condamine river, there will be further reductions in water resulting from arbitrary rules which are yet to be finalised in the water plan for Condamine River.

We have been led to believe that no one would be disadvantaged by the NWI without compensation. However, there has been no mention of compensation for reduced water allocations.

6. Anomalies in Sector Water Use

There are anomalies in water use standards between industries. In the rural sector there is a moratorium on further irrigation development, stock water facilities are closely regulated and farms are expected to be environmentally sustainable. All new artesian bores must be capped and water piped so there is no wastage.

At the same time, water is allocated for new mines and power stations, while there are companies extracting coal seam gas with water as a bi-product. The coal seam gas industry is required to construct ring tanks to evaporate large volumes of salty water, thus wasting water and leaving an environmental hazard behind. To be environmentally sustainable they should have to purify this water for more useful purposes.

7. Innovation and improved water efficiency at Chinchilla

Innovation and improvements to the storage and use of water are needed over time. But after more than 10 years of deliberation, we still do not have a final water management plan for the Condamine River. The time taken by government to develop plans and to make or approve changes to water use is a major impediment to innovation and to improve the efficiency of water use.

The Chinchilla weir stores approximately 10,000 megalitres and usually fills at least once every year. However, the annual water use from the weir is less than 2000 ML due to inefficiencies in its operation. It is possible the yield and efficiency of the Chinchilla Weir system could be improved by a completely new look at ways to operate it and manage environmental flows and the reserves of high security water.

Improved efficiency may in some cases require changes to or a small increase in water allocation in the area. This is likely to be instantly vetoed by the authorities rigidly enforcing the Murray Darling Basin Cap.

However, the cap is inequitable and there have been distortions in the science of river flows and river ecology used to justify limits and cutbacks in water allocations. Some flexibility in water allocations is justifiable in the interests of making changes over time and improving the efficiency of water use.

Queensland utilises only 19% of its annual contribution to the Murray-Darling Basin compared to 40 – 50% for southern states. The whole basis of irrigation policy is based on major flaws and distortions in the science and understanding of the impact of irrigation on river flows and on the health of the river systems.

8. Better science for better water policies

Water policy in Australia is being driven largely by concerns about the impact of water extractions for irrigation on river health. Commonwealth policies which are coupled with financial payments to the States are driving state agendas.

If the basic platform of water reform is wrong due to distortions in the science underpinning it, this in turn leads to flawed policies and a flawed public perception of irrigation and the river systems.

According to Dr Peter Wylie, an agricultural scientist in Dalby, there are three major flaws or distortions in science and public perception about irrigation which have not been countered by government water authorities, because it suits their objectives:

8.1 Queensland irrigators affect the flow of water into South Australia.

Much of the water from Queensland river systems does not reach the NSW border, let alone the Murray river. It soaks up into dry river beds and spreads out across the plains during flood events.

Less than 50% of the water which flows over the Chinchilla weir reaches St George. Less than 25% of the water flow at St George reaches the Queensland border and another 50% of this water is likely to be lost before it reaches the Darling River. It has been reported that only 4% of the water in the Darling River at Bourke reaches the Murray River.

If irrigation on the Darling Downs was stopped completely, this would result in an extra 100,000 ML of river flow at Chinchilla. Around 250 megalitres of this would reach the Murray. Even if these estimates were wrong and the figure was ten times this amount, the same effect on Murray River water could be achieved by buying and decommissioning one small rice farm on the Murray as from stopping the entire irrigation industry on the Darling Downs, worth $100 million a year.

8.2 Where is the ecological evidence that reduced water flow has affected the health of rivers in Queensland, which flow only a few days a year.

The main basis for reduced water allocations is that there is environmental stress on the river systems. What if this stress is not caused by water extraction, but mostly by other influences, such as land use change and carp?

Most of the ecological studies have assessed 'current condition' with 'natural condition'. The reports have never tried to distinguish or separate the effects of water extraction. They are based on flawed logic.

Local conservation experts say that the most serious impact on river health (compared to its natural condition) is erosion, both streambank erosion on the river system and on farming and grazing land in the catchment and the impacts it has on high turbidity, nutrients and siltation. However, erosion was never mentioned by the Environmental Report on which the Water Allocation and Management plan for the Condamine River was based.

8.3 River flows are substantially reduced due to irrigation.

There has been a significant increase in the runoff potential of land since the time of 'natural flows.'

The increased runoff from some 800,000 hectares which has been levelled and cultivated on the Darling Downs (above Chinchilla) has been modelled at 15 mm per year or 120,000 ML per annum, which is similar to the amount of water being used for irrigation each year.

This effect is acknowledged by scientists of the Department of Natural Resources, but not by their engineers and modellers. A glance at the river flows at Chinchilla since the 1930's would suggest the river flows have increased, despite irrigation development on the river, which has occurred mostly since 1960. See appendix 1.

9. Conclusion

There needs to be better science underpinning water policy initiatives. There needs to be some flexibility and a more equitable way of allocating water entitlements (cutbacks and/or small amounts of extra water) to different states and areas between states, based on water usage from the river systems and extra contribution from natural runoff.

This would suggest there is room for some further irrigation development, or fine-tuning in Queensland, and the Chinchilla irrigation district in particular.

Appendix 1. Streamflow at Chinchilla