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The Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

2nd April 2007

RE: INQUIRY INTO ADDITIONAL WATER SUPPLIES FOR SOUTHEAST QUEENSLAND—
TRAVESTON DAM/ MARY RIVER INFORMATION

Dear Sir /Madam

I would like to make this submission to the Senate Inquiry into southeast Queensland's water supplies and, in particular, the construction of the Traveston Crossing Dam.

Some questions on the southeast Queensland water “crisis”, Paradise Dam, and the plan for a dam on the Mary River at Traveston Crossing.

I live near the Mary, upstream of Gympie, not far down from Kenilworth, in the rain shadow of the coastal hills.

In the 27 years I've lived here, I've come to know the Mary as a by no means voluminous river. True, there's been the odd major flood but they seem to have been less and less frequent. I've seen far more droughts than floods, though, and they only seem to be getting more common, more long-lasting. Last week, our Cooloola Shire was declared drought-affected after it recorded well below average rainfall in the past year.

How often we look enviously over the hills towards the coast watching laden rain-clouds disgorging their loads.

“And the blighters down there don't even have rainwater tanks,” we mutter.

I used to think of drought and flood as two different sides of the one coin, one giving way, eventually, to the other.

But now we have to contemplate climate change, and the possibility that droughts might go on longer, that rains, when they do come, might be far more torrential, and that both may well be geographically more localized, more patchy.

I hear our water “crisis” is as a result of our expanding population. Why, then, are the dams in the fastest growing areas still in a pretty good state while those further inland aren’t?

I do some research. A Sunwater website shows dam after dam at critical levels. Bjelke-Petersen Dam (which drains the Bunya Mountains) 3%, Moogerah Dam, now 4%, Wivenhoe 19%, while Somerset starts to look relatively healthy at around 30%.

These dams had been the hope of a post-war Queensland, when we shared the conviction (along with the rest of the country) that the hope lay in big impoundments; dams, weirs and irrigation schemes, adding water to a dessicated continent. We turned the Snowy around and are only now preparing to pay the enormous cost of trying to rectify the folly.

Engineer Bradfield was a man who thought big. Not content with the Sydney Harbour Bridge in his portfolio, he fondly contemplated turning our northern rivers around. There are still those, most recently our own state Premier, who take up his cause, his call.

My grandfather too was a dam engineer. When I travel with my daughter and my own grandson around some of southeast Queensland’s failing dams, I am caught between two worlds; that of my grandfather and the vision splendid of unlimited water and the marvelous potential he believed it held, contrasting so starkly with the reality confronting me from receding shoreline after receding shoreline.

I visit Paradise Dam on the Burnett, Queensland’s newest dam. They’d contemplated calling it “Boolgee”, an aboriginal word meaning “full”.

Lucky they didn’t. Summer rains were predicted to fill it in its first wet season but they didn’t. All we got was a major fish kill and a dam that’s been dropping ever since to currently hold a mere 10% of its 300 000 megalitre capacity.

I explore Paradise with my daughter; the wall, the backwaters, the drowned Burnett River, and I see my first Lungfish in the wild. Not quite in the wild, I guess, but they seem to be getting by in the new dam.

Researching further, I find how long-lived Lungfish are; life spans considerably longer than our own. I find research that spells out their requirements for breeding and these are certainly not met by dams. In fact, researchers have been having trouble finding young fish.

Low rates of recruitment spell trouble for any species but they’re harder to detect for such long-lived species, a sort of creeping extinction. Approximate numbers of Lungfish on the planet... fewer than 10 000, apparently.

Professor Gordon Grigg of the Queensland University helps put the Lungfish in its evolutionary context. Being the link between life on land and life in water, the Lungfish is a bit like finding a dinosaur still living in some isolated pocket.

Only this isn't just one Lungfish, it's a viable population of 10 000 or so, and we've known about them for a while. Familiarity breeds complacency, I feel.

With the Burnett and its tributaries now impeded by some 30 impoundments (Paradise is merely the most recent), you can understand concerns about the Lungfish's future and it brings home the significance of hanging on to the Mary.

I learn of an old aboriginal woman who refers to the waterhole below Traveston Crossing by an aboriginal name which means "place of noses" referring to the abundance of Lungfish near the surface. A big pool is not unlike a dam but it's the riffles and weed-lined margins that make the difference; ancestral breeding grounds, they call them.

Do we understand what we're poised to lose, I wonder. I think Gordon Grigg would agree.

Is there any alternative?

How good is the dam site at Traveston, and does the government have any alternative but to build a dam there?

Deputy Premier vows that had Traveston been built a few years back, it'd be well on the way to being full. Cooloola Mayor Mick Venardos, on the other hand, recalls Gympie having to buy water a few years back, so low was the flow in the river. Tiaro Deputy Mayor Daryl Stewart tells how the tidal barrage just above Maryborough hasn't had water flow over it for the majority of the past five years. It's like the Murray scarcely flowing into the sea.

And this will drought-proof southeast Queensland..... well, after 2011 anyway.

Maybe it's the urgency of the situation but southeast Queenslanders are showing themselves more than willing to look at other options. Rainwater tank rebate schemes have proven enormously popular though work needs to be done to build in more encouragement to purchase larger tanks.

Councils are at last seeing tanks as an asset, especially when the houses are in higher rainfall areas than their dam catchments. Tank installation is a labour-intensive industry which keeps pace with growth.

Public acceptance of recycled water has proven to far better than either water engineers or politicians would have anticipated. When Traveston dam was announced, it was further away than "an Armageddon situation", now it's literally in the pipeline.

We need to be sure that our responses to climate change doesn't exacerbate the problem. We need to be sure our ways of guaranteeing water supply in a changing and less predictable climate don't add more greenhouse gases.

Reliance on coal-fired electric pumps to push water hundreds of kilometres isn't smart but then nor is putting some of your best agricultural land under water.

Or constructing a dam in a Salinity priority Area. It's not just the threatened species that have me worried.

I read of the boon this dam'd be to the local economy and to recreation. I recall the claims made for Paradise that the *"\$200 million Paradise Dam on the Burnett River has potential to increase net wealth in the region by up to \$800 million a year and create more than 7000 new jobs."*

I try to marry this optimism with the word that water prices from the dam are way too high for irrigators and want to see evidence. But then, it's only "potential" and "up to".

And I think of the thriving recreational hubs alongside other dams... places like Esk or Moogerah.

We need to be looking at Paradise as a number of the same personnel are involved, both in the planning and approval process, that, and the fact that the Premier has publicly touted it as "raising the bar for environmental excellence".

Despite all his positive assertions, it's been listed on a worldwide list of failed dams. One has to subject all claims about Paradise Dam to the closest scrutiny and they bear enormous relevance to any plans for Traveston.

Similarly one needs to look very incisely at how this dam was announced. It came after a very scant study of its apparent potential (based on rainfall figures that exclude the last half dozen dry years, I might add). Many of the subsequent assertions would seem to have been more to shore up the decision than to provide meaningful new, and truthful, information.

The opposition to this dam has not been just from the "affected" area. There's been unanimous opposition from all the Councils along the Mary. Condemnation has come from all political quarters. Having been involved in a number of environmental issues over the years, I have never seen such a broad "whole of community" approach.

Southeast Queensland needs to be taking meaningful measures to improve the reliability of its water supply, particularly ones that invest dollars wisely in ways that will start to effect almost immediately. A dam at Traveston Crossing is not one of these.

If Traveston Dam is the answer, it must have been a pretty silly question.

Yours

Ian Mackay

What a dam cruel joke: Traveston's in drought (Sunshine Coast Daily 31.03.2007)

By Carolyn Tucker

THE shire that is supposed to secure south-east Queensland's future water supplies has been officially drought declared.

Primary producers in the Cooloolool Shire, home of the controversial Traveston dam, are now eligible to apply for drought relief assistance, including subsidies on the transport of water and fodder.

Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries Tim Mulherin said the drought declaration was effective from March 12, after the shire recorded well below-average rainfall in the past year.

"Most creeks in the area have had little flow, along with pasture quality being very low," Mr Mulherin said.

Mayor Mick Venardos said the declaration highlighted the absurdity of locating the dam at Traveston Crossing.

He said it was not the first time in recent years the shire had experienced a water shortage.

"I welcome the drought declaration," he said.

"Because it will allow struggling primary producers to draw on Government assistance.

"I would like to see it extended to small businesses in the area, which are also affected. But there is certainly some irony in this.

"We have said on a number of occasions that this is the wrong place for the dam because the Mary River and the catchment is not safe.

"In 2000 the Mary River stopped flowing and the city of Gympie had to buy in water from Baroon Pocket (Montville) to make sure our shire and the sewage system could continue to function.

"The decision to build the dam here is not based on scientific evidence and it's ludicrous."

Nearly two thirds of Queensland is now drought declared. Professor Stuart White, from the Institute for Sustainable Futures at Sydney's University of Technology, yesterday described the Traveston Crossing Dam as unnecessary and costly.

Prof White, who last month released a report which criticised the dam as "neither necessary nor desirable", said the dam would not provide any additional water for south-east Queensland during the critical drought period.

Meanwhile, Premier Peter Beattie has foreshadowed a possible expansion of the Water Commission's responsibilities when recycled water is introduced into south-east Queensland's drinking supplies.

After meeting with British water authorities this week, Mr Beattie said he would consider boosting the Commission's role to include the equivalent of the British inspectorate, which monitors water quality and provides regular public reports.

"Because they do put treated effluent back into the Thames, public confidence is based on the inspectorate, the fact it has regular reports that are done transparently and openly by an independent body," Mr Beattie said in London.