Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 There is not enough water in the system. This is the result of historic overallocations, the current unprecedented drought, and the emerging impacts of climate change.

6.2 The situation in the Coorong and Lower Lakes is not unique. Sites right through the Basin are suffering, all users have very little water and the majority of water held in storages is required for very high priority needs or to cover losses.

6.3 Future decisions to allocate scarce environmental water need to take into account this broader predicament.

6.4 Compulsory acquisition is neither necessary nor desirable.

6.5 Transmission losses are a factor in the uses to which environmental water should be put. As a general rule, the location and watering needs of environmental values and assets across the Basin informs where environmental water entitlement should be purchased.

6.6 While sea water is not the preferred option for saving what is now a predominantly fresh water ecosystem, the problems sea water would cause are less dramatic than runaway acidification.

6.7 The committee notes the urgent need for a holistic approach to managing the Basin, as it provided for in the July Intergovernmental Agreement between Basin jurisdictions.

6.8 The committee notes that the potential introduction of sea water together with some other management options requires investigation, environmental impact assessment and community consultation. To provide for the possibility that the introduction of sea water is required, the committee notes that approval for such action, under the EPBC Act, would be required.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

6.9 Given the long term challenges posed by climate change in particular, the committee supports the need for a management plan to address the long term threats to the site's environmental values. The committee also notes that the Australian Government has committed $200 million to support the South Australian Government in developing such a plan.

Recommendation 2

6.10 Impediments to trading water should be lifted to allow a more efficient water market.

Recommendation 3

6.11 The potential value of bioremediation of exposed acid sulphate soils should be investigated further.

Recommendation 4

6.12 If the admission of sea water becomes necessary, the potential environmental impacts should be subject to further detailed investigation and community consultation. The committee expects all necessary approvals required under the EPBC Act would need to be sought.

Recommendation 5

6.13 The feasibility of pumping hypersaline water in the southern Coorong into the ocean should be assessed as part of the development of a longer term plan for this site.

Recommendation 6

6.14 In the longer term, drainage water from the upper south east should be diverted to the Coorong.

Senator Glenn Sterle
Chair