



Southern Alexandrina **Business** Association

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The Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Inquiry into water management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes**

Following please find a submission from the Southern Alexandrina Business Association (SABA) on behalf of the business and wider community of Goolwa, South Australia.

SABA represents over 100 businesses in the southern Alexandrina area, many of whom are suffering as a consequence of low water levels in the lower reaches of the River Murray.

Goolwa is unique with respect to other river communities in that the Goolwa pool level is the only one which is below sea level together with high salinity levels.

SABA respectfully seeks to appear in person before the committee.

Yours faithfully,

**John Clark**  
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**Copy:** All South Australian Senators  
Jamie Briggs  
Hon. Karlene Maywald MP, Minister for Water Security  
Michael Pengilly MP, Member for Finniss  
Adrian Pederick MP, Member for Hammond  
Hon. Dean Brown  
Barry Featherstone, CEO, Fleurieu Regional Development  
CEO, Boating Industry Association of South Australia

**Submission from Southern Alexandrina Business Association Inc. to the  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
Inquiry into water management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes**

**1 (a) The volume of water which could be provided into the Murray-Darling system to replenish the Lower Lakes and Coorong;**

According to the experts, something in the order of 1000 to 2000 Gl of water is required to replenish the Lower Lakes and Coorong. This volume of water is apparently not currently available in storage (either in the Murray-Darling system or otherwise). Therefore we see no prospect in the short to medium term of fresh water for the Lower Lakes and Coorong.

**1 (b) options for sourcing and delivering this water, including:**

- i possible incentive and compensation schemes for current water holders who participate in a once-off voluntary contribution of water to this national emergency,**

Water purchased at “market” rates. This does not need government intervention.

- ii alternative options for the acquisition of sufficient water,**

Provided that water is appropriately priced, leave it to market forces.

- iii likely transmission losses and the most efficient and effective strategies to manage the delivery of this water,**

According to our understanding, perhaps only 20% of released upstream stored water, if released now, would reach the Lower Lakes due to transmission and other losses, particularly given the poor state of the river system. Even if a significant amount of water were to be released today (say ~ 350 Gl) the approximate nett effect would be to deliver an increase in the level of Lake Alexandrina of around 50 mm. This water would probably all evaporate by end of summer 2009. This is compounded by the fact that with the current and projected low inflows, there is no sustainable flow. Given that currently stored upstream water is being held in reserve for critical human needs (particularly for Adelaide), and any other water may be taken at the expense of other upstream users, it is economically and socially questionable to release any water in the current circumstance.

Any upstream water which reached the Lower Lakes would have a very high salinity level (approaching 0.6 that of sea water) in summer.

**iv Commonwealth powers to obtain and deliver water and possible legislative or regulative impediments, and**

Under the current Constitution and the Council Of Australian Governments Agreement, the control of water is primarily on a state and territory basis with the states and territories being expected to act “cooperatively” in accordance with agreed water sharing and allocation formulae. If the states and territories chose to act outside these non-binding agreements the only power the Commonwealth has is to declare a State of Emergency.

**v assessment of the potential contribution of bringing forward irrigation infrastructure spending under the Council of Australian Governments agreement to deliver water to save the Coorong and Lower Lakes.**

While this is essential in the long term, the Lower Lakes has a much tighter timeframe.

**1 (c) The impact of any water buy-backs on rural and regional communities and Adelaide including compensation and structural adjustment; and,**

There needs to be sufficient water for irrigation and to keep existing communities viable.

**1 (d) any other related matters**

The Goolwa pool is the only one in the basin where the water level is below sea level. Therefore our situation is unique. The salinity levels of this pool is around 0.6 that of sea water and is not suitable for human needs or irrigation. This has had a significant impact on recreational boating, associated tourism and irrigation. The nearby towns of Milang and Clayton Bay are also similarly affected.

The community of Goolwa has an immediate need to address the impact of the business and wider community due to the exodus of boats and the consequent loss to the local and regional economy. These losses are of the non-farm sector type and are therefore not covered under the current Exceptional Circumstances arrangements. 50% of the boats have left Goolwa and those businesses who derive their livelihood from water-related activities are losing up to 90% of their income. Tourism and some main street businesses are down 20 to 40%. There have also been a large number of consequential job losses.

The Goolwa business community is calling for the raising of the Goolwa pool to +0.3 m AHD and the re-commissioning of the Goolwa Lock by Christmas 2008. Our suggestion is to construct a temporary barrier at Laffin’s Point (Goolwa North) and to fill the Goolwa pool with either sea or fresh water as appropriate.

We are also calling for the re-commissioning of the Goolwa Lock (associated with the Goolwa Barrages) so as to restore communication between the Goolwa Channel and the Coorong.

Both the installation of a temporary barrier and the opening of the Goolwa Lock can be done relatively quickly and at minimal cost with minimal environmental impact. The barrier will also protect Lake Alexandrina from salt ingress, and will not impede any last resort measures such as covering Lake Alexandrina with salt water.

**2. The implications for the long-term sustainable management of the Murray-Darling Basin system for inquiry and report by 4 December 2008, with particular reference to:**

The Murray Mouth needs a sustainable environmental flow in order to keep it open every year.

**2 (a) the adequacy of current whole-of-basin governance arrangement under the Intergovernmental Agreement,**

The problems relate to securing agreement/consensus between the states and territories and how to overcome conflicting interests. The whole-of-basin control needs to be under the Commonwealth with no power of veto from the states or territories. This was a major issue at the time of Federation and is still not resolved.

**2. (b) the adequacy of current arrangements in relation to the implementation of the Basin Plan and water sharing arrangements;**

The Murray-Darling Basin Commission appears to be powerless to control the water management of the basin. The basin is currently controlled essentially via the states and territories working cooperatively. This does not work.

**2. ( c) long-term prospects for the management of Ramsar wetlands including the supply of adequate environmental flows;**

The Ramsar wetlands of the Lower Lakes and Coorong are by definition of vital international significance, as are the other Ramsar-declared wetlands in the basin. They are also a fundamental tourism resource and there is therefore an economic impact if they are impaired. Regrettably, we cannot see, given the current projected low river system inflows, that there will be ANY significant environmental flows in the next say 3 to 5 years. Very low water levels leads to the potential of soil acidification. This then impacts on both native and migratory fauna and their associated habitat. In the event that there is zero or very low environmental flows, authorities must act to mitigate the acidification of the soil. Without fresh water this leaves the only option of sea water to cover at-risk soils or the application of more drastic engineering measures.

**2. (d) the risks to the basin posed by unregulated water interception activities and water theft;**

It is apparent that in some areas there are activities being undertaken to divert water and establish "illegal" dams. Clearly, these activities are inappropriate. The emerging Murray Darling Basin Authority needs to have the power to stop such activity and to order restoration of the system to an appropriate condition.

**2 (e) the ability of the Commonwealth to bind state and territory governments to meet their obligations under the National Water Initiative;**

Our interpretation of the National Water Initiative and the Water Act 2007 is that state and territory consensus is required and that cooperative agreements are effectively non-binding. The actions of the states and territories over the last 100 years, indicates that they tend to act to protect their own self-interest rather than taking a whole-of-nation approach. Given this, it is imperative that whatever legislation is in place, all actions and agreements are binding on all parties.

**2 (f) the adequacy of existing state and territory water and natural resource management legislation and enforcement arrangements , and;**

All water and natural resource management as it applies within the basin needs to be under common (Commonwealth) control. We believe that the existing arrangements are inappropriate.

**2 (g) the impacts of climate change on the likely future availability of water.**

In our view, the impact of so-called “climate change” is at best a second order contributor to the drought conditions being experienced within the basin. Most of the problems that we are now facing are the consequence of human intervention and mis-management, together with past over-allocation of water.

There needs to be far more scientific effort applied and a greater support for this by the government. Australia is the driest populated continent and should be a world leader in water management, drought mitigation and climatic research. The facts suggest that we are lagging here. Bodies such as the CSIRO and Bureau Of Meteorology have been seriously constrained over recent years in terms of funding and political direction. This needs urgent attention.

**3. Consideration of Emergency Water (Murray-Darling Basin Rescue) Bill 2008**

This Bill seeks *inter alia* to enhance the Water Act 2007 and National Water Initiative by introducing state of emergency provisions and powers. This is a most welcome concept which goes a long way to addressing the urgency of the situation. The current legislation addresses the medium to long term problems of the basin, whereas there are immediate actions needed. The Bill makes provision for the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to implement and action an Interim Basin Plan which is in advance on the long term solutions. We therefore support the general thrust of this Bill.

We would go further and suggest that the basin emergency be treated as if it were a cyclone, flood, tsunami or other such natural disaster. In these circumstances it is common to appoint a military commander to take control until such time as the new Murray-Darling Basin Authority becomes fully operational.