



PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO WATER MANAGEMENT IN THE COORONG AND LOWER LAKES

Submission by Alexandrina Council

The Alexandrina Council covers some 1800km² southeast of Adelaide and connects with Lakes Alexandrina and Albert, along with the Coorong and Murray Mouth.

Our council and our community see ourselves as integral to this inquiry and to the national debate on the future of the Lower Lakes.

We have called for national leadership on this issue for some time. The Federal Government has, until recently, talked more about the previous government's lack of action, rather than its own action plans.

We are pleased with recent progress, the Prime Minister's visit in August and his announcement of an audit of water use along the Murray Darling Basin.

This is a good first step towards a longer-term approach to sustainably use the River Murray but the Lower Lakes are in trouble *right now*. We must act now if we are to have any realistic hope of saving the Lakes.

Alexandrina Council, with the support of our strong community, has been the leading voice in this debate. We see, right under our noses, the environmental damage at the end of the River Murray.

What is now clear is that, whether there is drought, or climate change or a changing combination of both, the real issue is allocation. We cannot afford to over-allocate for any single use.

Our environment and sustainable activity is the priority across the entire system. The challenge for government is to set the priority then tailor allocation to meet it.

There is no time left to allocate blame. It is the job of current governments supported by their communities to act with determination to fix this issue so future generations do not have to pay the price.

What the Lower Lakes need to survive this summer is at least 250 gigalitres of fresh water. This has been our consistent message throughout and the experts agree.

Beyond February 2009, the Lower Lakes need a consistent supply of fresh water coming from upstream to ensure survival.

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Our view that fresh water is available upstream in the Murray Darling Basin is supported by the submission to this inquiry by the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts last week.

There are eight options for consideration in that submission. Five detail potential fresh water supplies, two discuss salt water options for the Lower Lakes and one relates to the continued pumping of fresh water from Lake Alexandrina to Lake Albert as a short-term option.

The five fresh water options outline the difficulties involved in delivery of that water. All involve effort and co-operation among governments to sort out water trading regulations, water sharing plans and the like.

Alexandrina Council understands that letting the Lower Lakes decline further will lead to acid sulphate soils which will destroy the environment of the Lakes. Letting the Lower Lakes decline further is not an option.

Before any government takes the easy option of introducing salt water into the Lower Lakes, it needs to answer these questions;

- What damage will salt water do to the Lower Lakes environment?
- How many native fish, birds, frogs, turtles and other wildlife that rely on a fresh water system will die if salt water is introduced?
- If salt water is introduced, when will the Lakes be turned to fresh water again?
- How is the eco-system in the Lower Lakes meant to adapt to changes back and forth?
- How much will it cost to fix the Lower Lakes and make them fresh water again if we turn them salt water?
- How can we guarantee the protection of the eco-systems of the important Finniss and Currency Creek estuaries?
- Will the 80 percent of River Murray birdlife that reside at the Lower Lakes die or relocate?
- How would salt water in the Lakes affect the area's international RAMSAR wetlands status?
- What effect will this salt water have on the ground water aquifers around the lakes?

While putting salt water into the Lower Lakes is the easy option to prevent them from acidification, we have no idea of the true cost of this option.

Fresh water from the Murray Darling Basin system is the only option for the Lower Lakes which we know is sustainable.

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For water management of the entire Murray Darling Basin system to be successful, it must be done from the mouth of the Murray up. First make sure the Murray, the Darling and the Murrumbidgee rivers have enough water to meet their needs for survival, before deciding how much can be taken out.

Alexandrina Council is asking two things of the Federal Government. Both are as hard as they are necessary. Both will require our Government to provide national leadership and resolve. We ask that:

1. The Federal Government to intervene to ensure the environmental and economic sustainability of the Murray-Darling system, even if that requires stepping on state's toes.
2. A minimum of 250 gigalitres of fresh water be immediately released into the River Murray to ensure the Lower Lakes survive the coming summer.

We as a community rely heavily on the Lower Lakes. They are our home. We use them for living, recreation and business. They belong to the nation. We treasure them as an amazing place of natural beauty.

We thank the committee for this inquiry as a sign of the Australian Parliament's focus on and commitment to taking urgent action on this issue.

Kind regards
Mayor Kym McHugh
Alexandrina Council

10th September 2008