

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

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*Inquiry into the Urgent Provision of Water to the Coorong and Lower
Lakes*

The Ramsar listed sites, the Coorong and Lower Lakes, are in danger of permanent damage if water is not delivered to the area very shortly. How has this come about? Principally because there has not been a single, independent authority managing the Murray Darling Basin. Drought is now an exacerbating factor. Drought alone has not created the current crisis.

The response from Governments has to date been underwhelming. The recently signed intergovernmental agreement on Basin management does not guarantee a truly independent authority to manage the Murray Darling Basin. Such an authority must be responsible for developing a sustainable water sharing agreement and enforcing it. The current agreement is inadequate from several perspectives, as follows.

Section 3.1.1 of the intergovernmental agreement has the objective of developing " a Basin Plan for sustainable management for the whole

Basin: and autonomy for the Authority to prepare the Basin Plan and deliver programs within the Basin, in the context of clear accountabilities to the Commonwealth Minister, the Ministerial Council and the Basin Officials Committee.”

This does not guarantee the autonomy needed for this Authority to deliver programs it may see as necessary for sustainable water management.

*Section 3.2.9 “The parties note the considerable body of decisions and practice that determine the operation of the River Murray System, as part of the delivery of water under State water shares. **The Authority will continue these arrangements unless otherwise agreed by all parties through the Ministerial Council or the Basin Officials Committee as appropriate.**”* This allows the Authority to change policies only when the Basin Officials Committee or the Ministers agree.

*Section 3.3.6 “The Authority will have two roles. One role will be to prepare, implement, monitor and enforce the Basin Plan, including the environmental watering plan, as provided for in the Water Act. **The other role will be the responsibility for implementing the decisions made by the Ministerial Council and the Basin Officials Committee.**”* Does this not say that once the Authority has prepared the Basin Plan, its main role is not to run the Basin, but to implement decisions taken by the Basin Officials Committee.

Section 3.3.13 “The Basin Officials Committee will:

- (a) have an advisory role to the Authority on the Basin Plan, as provided for in the Water Act;*
- (b) advise the Ministerial Council in relation to outcomes and objectives on major policy issues, that are not addressed in the Basin Plan, for the management of the Basin’s water and other natural resources;*

- (c) *give effect to any policy or decision of the Ministerial Council which the Ministerial Council delegates to the Basin Officials Committee;*
- (d) ***set objectives and outcomes in relation to the River Murray operation by the Authority;***
- (e) *be responsible for resolving operational management and delivery inconsistencies that arise between the application of the Basin Plan and States' management and delivery of their water entitlements and allocations including State water shares, seeking to optimise multiple benefits and maximise efficiency and flexibility and to minimize future conflicts;*
- (f) ***be responsible for high level decision making in relation to operation of the River Murray System; and***
- (g) *be responsible for monitoring the asset management plan, approved by the Ministerial Council and implemented by the Authority."*

That is, the Basin Officials Committee will tell the Authority what it has to achieve. The Authority will not be responsible for making high level decisions.

The Federal Government is urged to use its powers to create a new Authority to develop a sustainable water sharing regime and with the power to enforce its decisions. This Authority should only be responsible to the Federal Minister who could not override the decisions of the Authority without recourse to Parliament.

When the current audit of water in this Basin is complete we urge the prioritising of sufficient water for the maintenance of the river system for the period of the drought and thereafter a permanent allocation of water to ensure ongoing environmental security. Apply science based evidence to the decision making. See the Basin as a whole entity, oblivious of State

borders. Take account of all surface and ground water and of all rivers in the Basin.

Healthy, viable river communities need a healthy river system. The two cannot be separated.

Those Australians who know and understand the river have expressed concerns over many years that high extraction volumes were damaging the very system on which so many of us rely.

We urge the Government to accept the advice of scientists we taxpayers pay for and put in place emergency measures to sustain human needs at minimalist levels and, if possible, the system, for the period of the drought.

Of equal importance is the development of permanent, enforceable solutions for the long term maintenance of the Murray Darling Basin.

Thank you for accepting this submission.