Inquiry into Water Management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes

SUBMISSION

Mary J. Chandler

Inquiry into Water Management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes

Mary J. Chandler,

I would like to thank the Senate for the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry into water management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes and the implications for the long-term sustainable management of the Murray Darling Basin system for inquiry and report by 4 December 2008.

Terms of Reference 1

For several decades now people living along the Murray and scientists have commented on the declining health of the river and the urgent need to do something about it before it is too late.

Unfortunately these pleas were ignored by Governments, and it is only now, when the Murray Darling Basin is in crisis and everyone has started jumping up and down, that much talking and a little action is taking place.

The crisis has been brought about by cumulative effects - gross mismanagement over the last 100 years by all governments, both state and federal; water trading and unbundling of water from land; over-allocations of water; droughts; and more recently the consequence of climate change with its rise in temperatures and its decrease in rainfall.

This crisis impinges upon communities living along the length of the Murray, from its source to the sea and there appears to be no viable or sensible solutions available for these communities. Instead, they are looking down the barrel of bankruptcy, and the dissolution of family and community life as it is known today.

Not only South Australia is affected, but Victoria (particularly the north west area) and New South Wales also.

Reports released by the CSIRO and Murray Darling Basin inspire little hope or help to these communities as shown in the MDBC Drought Update No 15 – September 2008.

"MDBC Murray System Drought Update No. 15 – September 2008 ISSUE 15: SEPTEMBER 2008

IN BRIEF

System inflows remain critically low. August rainfall was below average and the monthly system inflow of 275 GL was less than a fifth of the long

term average of 1,550 GL. The combined inflow for the three winter months (of 670 GL) was the equal 5th lowest in 117 years of records.
In the two years ending August 2008, Murray system inflows were 3,540 GL which is just over half of the previous two year minimum prior to this drought (6,800 GL in 1943-45).
Storage levels also remain extremely low. Active storage in the Murray system is only 1,690 GL (or 20 % of capacity), which is well below the August long term average of 5,600 GL (or 62 % capacity).
A persistent rainfall deficiency during the past 7 years, particularly in the alpine areas, has been the main cause for the record low inflows to the Murray system. Above average temperatures have exacerbated the situation.
A target flow of 900 ML/day along the Murray past Wellington, combined with local rainfall and reduced evaporative losses during the winter months, has allowed the water level in Lake Alexandrina to gradually rise to its current level of -0.26 m AHD (or 1.0 m below Full Supply Level). This has provided some short term relief and has delayed the potential for acidification. However, with the arrival of warmer weather in spring, evaporative losses will start to increase, and the water level is expected to start falling again.
The outlook for the Murray system remains very serious. Critical human needs can now be met through to next winter but water available for irrigation remains very low. Prospects for the coming season are dependent on rainfall and run-off that is yet to happen. Water use is likely to be well below average and similar to the last two years.
Even with above average rainfall in the coming months, inflows would likely remain well below average. Recovery of the system is likely to take several years of above average rainfall.

MDBC Murray System Drought Update No. 15 – September 2008
RAINFALL AND SYSTEM INFLOWS
After a very dry autumn and a record low inflow in June, rainfall in the upper Murray and its tributaries was slightly above average for July. However, due to the very dry catchments, the July system inflow of 300 GL remained well below the long term July average of 1,180 GL (see Figure 1).
August rainfall was once again below average and the monthly inflow decreased to 275 GL which is less than a fifth of the long term average of 1,550 GL. The three monthly inflow for winter (of 670 GL) was the equal 5th lowest in 117 years of records.
020040060080010001200140016001800JunJulAugSepOctNovDecJanFebMarAprMayTotal Monthly Inflow (GL) Long Term Average 1997/98 - 2007/082006/07 (lowest on record)2007/082008/09 “

There is absolutely no room for political opportunism and it needs a bi-partisan approach from all parties, states and the federal government to come anywhere near solving the

problems of the Murray Darling Basin and they all must pursue the priorities listed in the National Water Commission's 'Future directions for water-dependent ecosystems.'

The Coorong and Lower Lakes are listed as a wetland of International Significance under the Ramsar Convention. It was nominated because of the diversity of wetlands found there: fresh, estuarine and hypermarine and also because of the importance of the area to vast numbers of water birds; ducks, swans, pelicans, terns, grebes and migratory sandpipers and endemic shorebirds (stilts and avocets).

Over time the Coorong and Lower Lakes has seen several changes to its environment, and due to the fact that the necessary maintenance and environmental flows to the River has not been allocated, it is about to change once more.

For at least six years the Coorong has not received upstream flows of freshwater, and over the last two years the water levels in the Lakes have dropped to below sea-level. It is highly unlikely to get an environmental allocation large enough to push fresh water over the barrages for several more years at least, causing the salinities in the southern Coorong to rise way above the maximum levels that key fauna can tolerate.

To quote from the MDBC Murray Drought Update No 15 – September 2008 again:

"THE LOWER LAKES
The flow over Blanchetown Weir (Lock 1) is being carefully managed to maintain the water quality at the major urban pumping stations between Blanchetown and Wellington. Also, a target flow of 900 ML/day is passing downstream to Wellington and into the Lower Lakes. This flow, along with local rainfall and reduced evaporative losses during the winter months, has allowed the water level in Lake Alexandrina to gradually rise from its record low of -0.5 m AHD in April 2008 to its current level of -0.26 m AHD. This has provided some short term relief and has delayed the potential for acidification in Lake Alexandrina. To reduce the risk of acidification in Lake Albert, water continues to be pumped from Lake Alexandrina, and this has resulted in Lake Albert's water level increasing from about -0.6 m AHD in April 2008 to about -0.20 m AHD.
However, with the arrival of warmer weather in spring, evaporative losses will start to increase, and the level of Lake Alexandrina is expected to start falling again. This will be closely monitored while short and longer term management strategies are developed to maintain Lakes Alexandrina and Albert above acidification thresholds"

The installation of the Barrages in the late 1930's saw the commencement of the modern ecological changes to both the Coorong and the Lakes. Once installed, the Barrages prevented marine water entering the lakes during periods of low River flow and at the same time also allowed water levels to be elevated within the lakes.

Originally the Lakes were not fresh all the time. There were times when the lakes would have been estuarine having salinities between those of freshwater and marine water. It

would appear the duration and frequency of estuarine conditions would have been short-lived except during severe droughts. However in the 1930's approximately 80% of water entering the Murray went out to sea and this has decreased over the years until today no water reaches the sea.

I do not believe that the Barrages should be removed as it could possibly do untold harm to the ecology of a system that has been predominately fresh for over sixty years. Because of the low water flow in the Murray at present, if the Barrages are removed then sea water could enter the lakes and travel upstream for great distances, not only wiping out the irrigation areas along the Murray in South Australia, but also destroying the medium of drinking water to all its towns.

A flow must be released along the Murray now to help with the short-term problem until solutions have been decided upon.

There is an obligation under the Ramsar Convention to maintain some of the freshwater habitat, but perhaps some of this can be answered by suggestions from scientists to minimize the impact of acid sulphate soils, such as spreading lime, mulching or planting up some of the areas to mitigate potential damage.

It is obvious that compromises and changes will have to be made and might I suggest that you contact a number of scientists, including Assoc. Professor David Paton, Adelaide University School of Earth and Environmental Sciences. David Paton has been doing a large amount of scientific work on the Coorong and Lower Lakes for many, many years and I am sure he is currently looking at mitigation and other solutions to save this area from the complete disaster it facing at the moment.

Species such as the pelicans and fairy terns are struggling as a consequence of the lack of flows to the region and are now deprived of effective breeding opportunities within the Coorong. The only permanent breeding colony of pelicans in Australia used to be in the southern Coorong and even around Mildura, an area where pelicans used to be found in large numbers, there has been a decrease in numbers and only a few birds can be seen.

Fairy terns have just been listed on the IUCN red list as vulnerable to extinction, given the ongoing lack of effecting breeding in the Coorong there has been populations declines from ca 1500 in the 1980's to ca 300 now.

In terms of importance for migratory waders – 20% of the global population of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers use the Coorong as their summer refuge, but there numbers are declining, as are those of Red-necked Stints and Curlew Sandpipers. In the 1980's 40,000 Curlew Sandpipers typically used the Coorong and now it is down to a few thousand, if that.

The real issue now is the key food chains that supported these birds and many others during the 1980's and 90's have all gone.

We have all seen on television and heard that the changing conditions in the lakes have also affected wildlife with the incursions of marine water due to seepage through or under the Barrages. This is permitting a serpulid worm to colonise the lakes settling on hard surfaces including the shells of tortoises and eventually stopping them from retracting their appendages to escape predators.

It is the Government's obligation and all the rest of us as well under the Ramsar Wetland Convention to maintain at least some of this freshwater habitat, and this must be the first priority before anything else is dealt with.

None of this can be achieved unless the underlying cause of these systems and the Murray River collapsing is addressed - over-allocation across the whole Murray Darling Basin and this has been caused by increased population extracting water for human uses plus Managed Investment Schemes, Water Trading and Unbundling placed the final nail in the coffin. The latter three must be stopped immediately, and no more land must be allowed to be opened for irrigation, otherwise the Murray Darling Basin and the Murray River will never have a chance of surviving and the Murray will never be provided with a proper sustainable environmental flow.

(a) It is obvious that a huge volume of water is needed to replenish the Coorong and Lower Lakes and this will not be available in one environmental flow under current storage conditions and the stress all the way along the Murray River

(b) I do not believe that enough possible incentive and compensation schemes for current water holders who participate in once-off voluntary contribution of water to this national emergency has been or will be offered, as they will required all water still held to survive in the future. The amounts offered would hardly by a home if they move off the land, and then what do they do for work? In towns along the Murray relying on irrigation any job opportunities are fast disappearing as most jobs as in horticulture or land-based, and this is affecting banks, solicitors, engineering works and other business, who are and will be putting off workers not taken them on. So these schemes do not present opportunities for current water holders.

I really believe that all Federal MP's should spend a month living with (but not off) farmers along the Murray to experience the conditions they are faced with before any decisions are made. A month is not really long enough, but I think city-based people need to open their eyes to take in the huge mountain of problems out there.

It is difficult to understand why States and the Federal Governments have not implement new irrigation infrastructure prior to now, when suddenly it has been realised how important this is to help provide water savings from evaporation and seepage. Until now it has been convenient to ignore this issue, and once again things have been left until it is almost to late to repair the damage being

done. Where this is needed throughout the Murray-Darling Basin as well as along the Murray, it should be attended to immediately. Climate Change has to be dealt with, and this issue comes under irrigation infrastructure. Some of infrastructure has been around since the early 1900's.

It is important that environmental water enjoys the same security as water for consumptive uses. We must have a healthy environment - without that we will not be healthy.

Water buybacks will impact on rural and regional communities along the Murray as mentioned above. People will be left high and dry with no income and no jobs: councils will lose rates; professionals such as doctors, teachers, solicitors etc. will leave and the social fabric will dissolve.

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

(a) It is obvious that the current arrangements over many of the issues raised in this enquiry are grossly inadequate. How can there be a 'whole-of basin governance arrangements' for the Murray Darling Basin system for example, when both the Murrumbidgee in New South Wales and the Goulburn in Victoria are not included under the auspices of the Murray Darling Basin Commission? Both these Rivers are important Tributaries of the Murray River, yet in New South Wales water is extracted for cotton and rice growing in huge amounts so that there is very little inflow into the Murray, and in Victoria, the Goulburn has been so sadly depleted that it barely sees any water going into the Eildon Dam let alone provide inflows for the Murray. The Victorian Government, over the past two years has quickly and without proper research built pipelines to service Bendigo and Ballarat. As the former is in part of the Murray Darling Basin this is appropriate, but Ballarat should not have had a pipeline built from the Goulburn River. Instead it should have utilised recycled water, storm water, rain water tanks and aquifers first. To make matters worse, the Victorian Government is planning to build another pipeline, this time of all places, to Melbourne. Eildon was built to provide irrigation waters for the dry north and in the recent past, the Government promised it would not take water from the dry north for Melbourne. However, when Premier Brumby took over power, he has not honoured this promise and the Sugarloaf or North-South Pipeline is being rushed through without proper process being undertaken. I attach my Submission plus Referral for Reconsideration under separate cover. Whilst this is being planned irrigators in the Goulburn Valley, Swan Hill region, Robinvale and Sunraysia are looking down the barrel on zero allocation with not much prospect of this being lifted. Last year acres of permanent plantings from this huge food bowl area were allowed to die. Those that were barely kept alive by some previously held allocations or paid for by buying in water at over-inflated prices such as $1100-$1500, are now left with the thought that it was all for nothing. In Sunraysia, where I live, people are talking about seven suicides in the last two months. If this is the case, it is just not on.

What does the Federal Government plan to do about food? How will it be able to source food from overseas if there is a food shortage, and why should Australians be forced to eat food which is unregulated and not subject to the rules and regulations that apply in Australia?

The states are also not meeting their agreements under the National Water Initiative, in fact have they ever? Nor are they coming close to dealing with the commitments that they made under the COAG Agreement. Why was Queensland allowed to break its agreement not to allow development of the Paroo? Why doesn't the Commonwealth put pressure on them to deliver as promised? Is this too hard to do? The COAG Agreement is just a joke.

(b) The Federal Government indeed has to make many hard decisions, one being that the Commonwealth and all the states not only agree to but commence water sharing plans in 2011 when the cap comes into place. If necessary the Commonwealth must force this issue onto all the states. The New South Wales water sharing plans at the moment will stay in place until 2014 and the Victorian water sharing plans will stay in place until 2019. This is totally unacceptable and must be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

(c) The long-term prospects for the management of Ramsar wetlands including the supply of adequate environmental flows will certainly be a challenge. The Murray Darling Basin Commission are well aware of future problems that will arrive with Climate Change, and I am sure that there will be years of heavy rainfall (though they will probably be shorter in length). With the "Living Murray" as a lead in, I am sure that appropriate measures to help the Ramsar wetlands along the Murray survive will be taken on board. It is vital to the health of the whole Murray that they are not allowed to disappear, otherwise a few decades down the track we will have another Willandra Lakes system on a hands - just a huge dust bowl with a sand-filled river. Maybe what has happened at Lake Mungo and surrounding areas should be studied.

If only all the parties in both the State and Federal Governments could work as one on this horrendous crisis, instead of political point scoring. It is time to put all differences and party politics on the backburner and to get on with the job. It really is a matter of urgency for the environment, for the people living along the Murray and for Australia as a whole.

River gums lose battle

Lost in 12 months – 414 MCG fields of trees at Lindsay Island

GHOST GUMS: Lindsay Island, 120km downstream from Mildura, where 840ha of river red gums have died in the past 12 months.

GHOST GUMS: Lindsay Island, 120km downstream from Mildura, where 840ha of river red gums have died in the past 12 months.

NEW research shows 840ha – or 414 MCG-size football fields – of river red gums died in the past 12 months at Lindsay Island, just 120km downstream from Mildura.

The shock finding has come from a draft report investigating the condition of the Lindsay, Mulcra and Wallpolla islands, released by the Murray Darling Freshwater Research Centre.

Lindsay Island is about an hour west of Mildura, in the Murray Sunset National Park, and there are increasing fears it is on the verge of a major environmental crisis.

Lindsay Island, together with Mulcra and Wallpolla islands, make up the Victorian component of the Chowilla Floodplain (Lindsay-Wallpolla Islands) Icon Site, which is one of six icon sites along the Murray River earmarked for restoration under the Living Murray program.

The program was developed as a long-term plan to tackle the declining health of the Murray River and is being implemented locally by the Mallee Catchment Management Authority, but the organisation is among those convinced the drought is speeding up the decline of the river and its surrounding wetlands and floodplains.

Lindsay Island is an 18,000ha floodplain formed by anabranches, such as Mullaroo Creek, that leave and later return to the Murray River.

It is highly valued for its vast array of threatened and rare species, as well as its rich indigenous history. It is home to multitudes of shell middens, burial grounds and hearths that show it was a meeting place for traditional owners.

Mallee CMA chairperson Joan Burns says the current condition of Lindsay Island is alarming.

"River red gums all along the Murray River are struggling but at Lindsay Island, we are looking at an area that may never recover," she said.

"Once river red gums are lost from the floodplain, it will take more than 100 years for the trees to grow to a similar established state. We are losing trees that are hundreds of years old."

Floods are crucial to prompting river red gums to germinate but, at Lindsay Island, river regulation and drought means there hasn't been a good over-bank flood for 14 years.

Mallee CMA hydrologist Dr Andrew Keogh is overseeing the restoration of Lindsay Island under the Living Murray program and shares Ms Burns' concerns.

Dr Keogh said current research and investigations would help frame the long-term solutions of the Living Murray program to restore health to Lindsay Island, but in the short term, environmental watering could be the only way to maintain what is still alive.

The water used in environmental watering is an environmental entitlement, legally set aside to protect rivers and wetlands.

A program of environmental watering was conducted at Lindsay Island in June and Dr Andrew Keogh believes the results of that watering are already evident.

"Where environmental water has been delivered at Lindsay Island, the death-rate of the river red gums isn't as high," he said.

"In the places where environmental water was used during the last watering, we can see red gums starting to shoot new growth."

He says the Living Murray program's long-term approach will include the building of structures, such as regulators, to make effective use of water that becomes available for environmental flows.

"Regulators have gates that can be opened or closed to mimic natural flooding conditions," Dr Keogh said.

"Ultimately, it will mean environmental water flows can be held back across the floodplain ensuring maximum possible benefit, rather than the water flowing immediately back out to the river."

The Coorong is probably facing the most immediate crisis and therefore it is not surprising that is where the alarm bells are ringing the loudest at the moment. However, other areas along the Murray in Victoria are also ringing extremely loud alarm bells too. I am attaching a photo of Lindsay Island and an article that appeared in our local newspaper, Sunraysia Daily recently. The scene in the photograph is horrific!!!! I wept when I saw it. I have grown up on the Murray and the Red Gums and the River are very, very special. How could past Governments allow this to happen and why is the Commonwealth Government not acting with a sense of urgency? And, why is the Commonwealth not looking at what is best for the Murray River instead of wanting to ring every possible dollar out of its water?

(d) (e) & (f) It is surely obvious that risks to the Basin posed by unregulated water interception activities and water theft are partly to blame for the state the Murray River finds itself in at the moment. New South Wales does not appear to be overly worried about water being stolen from its northern rivers. Satellite evidence is available to show that there has been unregulated use but its Government does not act to make it illegal. In spite of a leaked report showing the economic impact of not raising the four per cent cap, what is Victoria doing about this? The Commonwealth has to come down hard on these States and pull them all into line.

Why is cotton, a commodity that uses megalitres of water, grown in the dry area of Australia - Queensland and New South Wales? If one has to rationalise, this is not a food crop, so why not grow it in the wetter areas of Australia, in fact why grow it at all? This is a commodity that Australia can afford to buy from overseas.

To quote from ' **Disgraceful' water licence may ear $100m**
Greg Roberts The Australia 22 August 2008 (selected quotes)

"A State plan to issue a water licence ot the Cubbie Group that could be worth as much as $100million to the giant cotton station has been embraced by the Rudd Government. The federal Opposition said the move was disgraceful. Queensland Water Minister Craig Wallace said plans were proceeding to convert Cubbie's water allocations – which allow the property to store more than the capacity of Sydney Harbour – t0 a tradeable licence. About 25 per cent of the record 1.014 million megalitres diverted from the Murray-Darling system to Queensland irrigators in 2007=8 went to Cubbie storages. Mr. Wallace said the Resource Operation Plan for the Condamine-Balonne catchment was being finalised in partnership with Cubbie and other stakeholders. The plan included issuing tradeable water licences to irrigators. Cubbie, which has been trying to raise $200 million from overseas investors after a succession of losses in recent years, would get a licence for 94,655 megalitres, which could be sold for as much as $1000 a megalitre. "The Plan enables landholders, should they choose, to engage in water trading without having to sell part of their land," Mr. Wallace said. " "Mr. Wallace said the Bligh Government had not advised Senator Wong about whether the Cubbie Group, which is headed by former state Labor treasurer Keith de Lacy, should be included in allocation buybacks. NSW Liberal Senator, Bill Heffernan said it was disgraceful that Queensland was proceeding with the licences plan. "Australian taxpayers out to be alter to the fact that licences are about to be issued, which will then have to be bought back at their expense,' Senator Heffernan said. Senator Wong declined to comment."

I totally agree with the statement "that the move was disgraceful." The operation of the water market must be suspended and water allocated appropriately, based upon a set of rational priorities, placing environmental, irrigation and domestic needs ahead of global markets. Water Trading and Unbundling must be suspended now.

The water held by Cubbie, had it been allowed down the Darling, would have flowed into the Murray down to South Australia and alleviated the crisis experienced by the Coorong and the Lower Lakes. Hard decisions must be carried out with regard to properties such as Cubbie. It is good to see that the Commonwealth and NSW State Government have just purchased."Tooralee Station and plan to use its water back in the Darling. It is a pity that Cubbie could not be purchased also.

This is part of a Press Release Wed. September 10 by Senator Penny Wong:

"The Australian Government has worked closely with the NSW Government on the purchase of this significant property," Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator Penny Wong said.

"This is a great example of cooperative federalism – working together to deliver important progress for Australia's long term future."

Toorale currently holds entitlements to extract 14 billion litres of water from the Warrego and Darling Rivers each year, along with rights to harvest water from the floodplain.

"In securing these water entitlements and floodplain harvesting rights, the deal will return an average of 20 gigalitres of water to the Darling River each year, peaking at up to 80 gigalitres in flood years," Senator Wong said.

"Returning this water to the Darling will begin to turn around the long term decline of this once great river."

The Toorale Station is a historic grazing and cropping property which is located on the junction of the Darling and Warrego Rivers, near Gundabooka National Park. It contains landscapes of considerable cultural significance to the Aboriginal community and the historic heritage of the property is well recognised."

It is very difficult for people to follow just what the continuation of water reform means also. It would seem that under water reform water is about to be privatised and I agree with comments I have heard that the national water market established by the Australian Government's Water Act 2007 does not allow for the operation of priorities to address domestic needs vs. overseas markets. Exploitation of our water resources has been in operation far too long and this includes over-allocation.

I would like to add my voice to those calling for the formation of a independent State of Emergency Board. The Australian, September 3, 2008 quoted National Water Commission Chairman, Ken Matthews as saying "there were no national guidelines for dealing with over-allocation Under current conditions, many significant water-dependent ecosystems are under threat," he said. "This is preposterous, moreover, it is COAG, and not the Senate, that should be immediately calling for a State of Emergency as under the Australian Constitution the States control the allocation of water., it is time they got it right."

The Commonwealth and State Government and the water reform movement need to be brought to account for their failure to appropriately manage the Murray-Darling Basin (see Section 100 of the Australian Constitution) and in order to do this a public Commission of Inquiry into the Murray-Darling Basin should be established.

It is the people who voted the current members of Parliament in, on the expectation that they would deal fairly, openly and quickly with matters of crisis such as the state of the Murray Darling Basin.

It is not right that both Federal and State Members of Parliament are not accountable to the people, and a comprehensive public Commission of Inquiry into the Murray-Darling Basin would, I am sure, turn up many interesting facts.

Managed Investment Schemes that see Investors free of taxation whilst ordinary farmers have to pay heavily are morally corrupt and should also not be allowed to continue. MIS's in north west Victoria (one such scheme set in place by Timbercorp) have been detrimental to the management of the Murray-Darling Basin. While ordinary irrigators have had to sit on zero allocations through much of 2007 and since July 1, 2008. the MIS's have huge funding available to buy up as much water as they want to. With the Murray-Darling Basin collapsing as a result of severe drought, mismanagement and over-allocation, it is not right that new irrigation developments that are opening up thousands of hectares are allowed to grab huge amounts of water for dams, when the health of the River is in crisis. To add insult to injury, all the water leaked out of the dams twice, and more water was bought up and placed in the dams.

I mentioned above that the seriousness of the situation is starting to hit home, with a number of suicides occurring over the past two months. Families are stressing out, there is family break up and social fabrics are disintegrating rapidly.

Recently I was speaking to a 'blockie' (the local terminology for irrigators in Sunraysia) about this Senate Inquiry and about the issue of water in generally. She has sent me the following letter, which I found very interesting. In 2005 she presented to a Panel Hearing with regard to the Long Term Containment Facility (or as called by the locals, Toxic Waste Dump) at Nowingi. It would appear that her predictions then have come true today, not by the building of a Toxic waste Dump which would have lost the area its "clean, green image' and with that its overseas markets, but by the lack of water which mean irrigators are unable to produce crops on their land.

"Dianne Dalla Santa
Box 272
Cardross
Victoria.
3496

Dear Mary

Back in 2005 I presented a submission to the government in what I thought was the fight of our lives to save our farms and livelihoods from the proposed Toxic Waste Facility at Nowingi.

Within my submission I painted a scenario of what I could envisage happening to this productive irrigation district on the banks of the Murray River.

Those words have come back to haunt me now as much of what I predicted could happen is actually happening right now. Vineyards are dead and dying. Large acreages are unproductive and not being worked by the horticulturists and the vermin has already moved in, rabbits and foxes are in abundance right at our back door.

I believe the government has displayed a total lack of forward planning by failing to increase the water storage facilities in line with the growth of the population and as such is wholly to blame.

I applaud and support all efforts being made to prevent our precious water from being stolen from the farming communities who feed this nation.

Yours sincerely

Dianne Dalla Santa

The following excerpt is taken from my 2005 submission.

So here is what I think can and in all likelihood will happen to a significant degree to this agricultural region if your proposal to install this facility is tragically allowed to proceed.

We lose our valuable markets and we become financially unviable. We are forced off the land by our financial institutions and apply to the government for social security. Could we stand the pain of losing everything? Will depression take our health and happiness away? Will the inability of our menfolk to provide for families be too much to bear and we might be burying them long before their time?

How do we fill our days in? Perhaps we could just take it easy until lunchtime, maybe go and change the DVD's when the day warms up a little. We might now have a health care card and so we can actually visit the doctor more frequently. No need to wonder whether we can ride out the sore throat and runny noses and aching joints or if we can afford the hundred dollars plus for medicines. We won't have to worry about finding the $3500 for private health insurance either. We would or maybe could be pensioners if there were still enough taxpayers to fund our pensions. And let's not forget all those other benefits like rebates on car registration and power bills etc.

Our properties and homes lost because we can no longer pay our mortgages become derelict. Squatters move in to our lovely home that we worked so hard for and they don't give a hoot about my garden, while we live in a government provided commission home.

Our vineyards and paddocks will be overrun with Boxthorn, Bathurst Burr, Caltrop and myriads of other noxious weeds that we now keep in control and then maybe a lot of non indigenous shrubs and trees from neglected gardens will encroach in to areas where they are not welcome and thereby need eradicating along with rabbits, foxes, feral cats and dogs. Fences will fall into disrepair, who needs a fence anyway, there is nothing left to keep in or out either for that matter.

Can the Government build thousands more commission homes to house us and employ hundreds of rangers to control the vermin and noxious weeds? Imagine the task to maintain the thousands of kilometres of fences along the highways and minor roads that enclose agricultural holdings. Vehicle insurance will skyrocket because wildlife will be much more prevalent on the roads. With income gone so too income tax is gone. "

(Attached please find the complete submission for your information.)

John Cobb issued the following Media Release:

Murray health report has food security ramifications

19/06/2008 1:28:00 PM

The leaked report on the dire health of the Murray Darling Basin not only highlights the grave situation in the Coorong and Lower Lakes but also puts the spotlight on the calamity facing the nations food bowl.

Opposition spokesman for water security, John Cobb, said the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Minister for Water, Penny Wong, were very blasé about where their food comes from and have never faced severe shortages.

"Irrigation will become increasing important as climate change begins to bite and it is vital that the Rudd Government puts the nation's food security at the top of its priority list," Mr Cobb said.

Mr Cobb has asked Minister for Environment, Peter Garrett, why the Rudd Government was supporting the Victorian Government's "theft" of 110 billion litres out of the Murray Darling Basin via a pipeline from the Goulburn River to Melbourne.

"Minister Garrett refused to give any commitment that he will stop the pipeline," Mr Cobb said.

"How can Prime Minister Rudd support a pipeline with a capacity to pump 110 billion of water out the MDB when not only are the Lower Lakes in South Australia in crisis, but the entire MDB food bowl is again on zero water allocations this year.

"Australian's, whether they are working or not, are all facing escalating food prices and the ridiculous decision to take 110 billion litres out the MDB will result in a massive increase in food prices across Australia, particularly when the drought is still biting.

"Australian farmers could produce enough food to feed six million people a year with 110 billion litres of water."

Mr Cobb said the former Government's $10 billion plan for water security guaranteed the food security for future generations while also returning water to the environment and increasing water security for urban communities.

"Communities, farmers and the environment within the MDB are crying out for help – inland Australian's and the environment does not have access to desalination plants and are wholly reliant on water which falls within the MDB."

Mr Cobb said couple this with the worlds' major food producing regions all being hit with climatic disasters over the past year and the ever present threat of diseases such as Avian Influenza hitting major agriculture producers, severe food shortages are a real prospect.

"Unfortunately the Rudd Government doesn't have a clue about what it is trying to achieve within the Murray Darling Basin; the Nation's Fresh Food Bowl.

"Under the current water policy when the drought finally breaks, MDB communities will go from a climatic drought straight in to a Rudd-made drought."

(g) The impacts of climate change on the likely future availability of water are quite frightening. As temperatures increase over the years and rainfall declines it paints a bleak picture. Scientists and engineers should be engaged to look into a variety of alternatives to counteract some of the impacts that will be felt. There as been talk about storing water that currently runs out to see in Queensland and running a pipeline south which can be used during really bad drought years. Perhaps this is one possibility –0 whatever decisions are taken for the future, then must be carefully considered and weighed before they are acted upon. There has also been talk of running a pipeline under the sea from Tasmania for Victoria. The long term environmental impacts of any of these proposals have to be worked out carefully, and if they are not viable, then they should be discarded.

Recycling, rain water tanks, alternative energy and tackling greenhouse gas emission are all part of this issues.

Governments must spend more money to extend and update railway systems throughout Australia and the use of B-doubles and triples should be phased out over a period. Both people and commodities can be transported by rail, resulting in far less greenhouse gas

emissions. Inner city areas should be closed off to motor transport completely and in cities such as Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide incentives should be used to encourage everyone to use public transport. Of course, infrastructure is badly in need of updating in Melbourne and probably the other cities as well and an efficient well-run transport system with frequent services available should be planned and built.

All Governments should assist with and encourage the use of alternative energy. And in all new housing areas it should be regulatory to have alternative energy such as solar panels on the roof, rain water tanks, a recycled water system as well as a potable water system for drinking purposes only.

To look at the short term, the following is information about the current drought in the MDBC's Drought Update dated September 15, 2008:

"THE CURRENT DROUGHT

For large parts of southern and eastern Australia, dry conditions have persisted since October 1996, a total of almost 12 years. During the last 7 years in particular, the Murray-Darling Basin has experienced severe rainfall deficiencies, and from September 2001 to August 2008 was the 2nd driest seven-year period (the driest was from 1939 to 1946). This rainfall deficiency, particularly in the alpine areas, has been the main cause for the record low inflows to the Murray system.

Other factors that have a potential impact on inflows include the 2003 bushfires, the increased number of farm dams, groundwater extraction and the increasing area of plantation forestry. Initial evidence however, suggests that these have had much less impact than the severe rainfall deficit combined with increased temperatures.

The current dry period and low water availability can be put into perspective by comparisons with similar extended droughts in the early and mid twentieth century. The average annual inflow of 3,800 GL/yr during the current drought (2002 to 2008) is lower than that experienced in the previous worst two droughts on record; 4,900 GL/yr in 1897 to 1904, and 5,600 GL/yr in 1938 to 1946. The current drought has also recorded the lowest inflows for virtually all periods from one month to ten years. In particular, for the two years ending August 2008, Murray system inflows were 3,540 GL which is almost half the previous two year minimum prior to this drought (of 6,800 GL in 1943-45). "

The Emergency Water (Murray-Darling Basin Rescue) Bill 2008 is difficult to comment on unless one understands the law. However, compensation offered to irrigators to sell out their water rights and move out is a joke - it might allow them to purchase a house in a nearby town but there would be no money left to live off and probably no prospect of any type of job in rural areas. The unbundling of water from land is so very wrong and it will create havoc throughout Australia in the future as deserted lands become a dustbowl, or covered with weeds and inhabited with feral animals. Buy-backs, such as Toorale Station is a much better way to go.

There is so much one could write on these issues. However I hope I have managed to impart some of my concerns with regard to the Coorong and the Lower Lakes and the Murray Darling Basin as a whole.

The National Water Commission position on water-dependent ecosystems is interesting and shows that the Commission considers this a challenge and it is to be hoped that it is able to pursue the following six priorities listed in its Report September 1, 2008.

"National Water Commission position
Water-dependent ecosystems

Water-dependent ecosystems in Australia

Water-dependent ecosystems include wetlands, floodplains, riparian areas, estuaries and springs. They provide many important services including provision of good quality water for irrigation and domestic use, habitat for fish and other aquatic fauna and flora, removal of wastes and contaminants, and aesthetic, cultural and recreational benefits. Without adequate and timely water these ecosystems lose their capacity to provide such services. In some cases, the losses may be irreversible; in others, they may be difficult and costly to reverse. Under current conditions, many significant water-dependent ecosystems are under threat.

Commitments under the National Water Initiative to water-dependent ecosystems

Striking a balance between water for consumptive uses and water for ecosystem health—so that environmental, social and economic outcomes are optimised—is integral to the National Water Initiative Agreement. Water planning is the fundamental means for achieving this balance. Overallocated water systems need to be restored to environmentally sustainable levels of extraction; in other systems, crucial environmental assets and ecosystem services need to be protected.

The National Water Initiative calls for:

-

environmental water to enjoy the same security as water for consumptive uses

- environmental water managers to be established and equipped with the necessary authority and resources
- water market and trading arrangements to protect the needs of the environment
- environmental water to be included in water accounts and audited
- periodic assessments of river and wetland health to be conducted so that adaptive management can be undertaken on an evidence basis.

Progress on water-dependent ecosystems

The National Water Commission's 2007 First Biennial Assessment of Progress in the Implementation of the National Water Initiative found that all states had made statutory provision for water to meet environmental and public benefit outcomes within water plans, however:

- over-allocated systems were not always adequately identified
- environmentally sustainable levels of extraction were poorly defined
- there was considerable variability in the quality of the science underpinning water plans
- in many cases the trade-offs between environmental and consumptive uses were not transparent
- there was often a lack of specificity in the environmental outcomes.

The Commission considers that the protection of threatened water-dependent ecosystems, including the recovery of overallocated systems, continues to be a major challenge in implementing the National Water Initiative Agreement.

The Commission's water-dependent ecosystems activities

Over the past three years, the focus of Commission activities has been on filling knowledge gaps and promoting science to support

good decisions about environmental water. These activities have included:

- commissioning the synthesis of existing knowledge about specific aspects of water-dependent ecosystems and their management “

I believe, as stated earlier, it is essential to establish a public Commission of Inquiry into the Murray-Darling Basin, and I urgently request that the Senate consider this when conducting its Inquiry. What other way can we be sure that the Commonwealth and State Governments and water reform movement can be brought into account for their failure to appropriately manage the Murray-Darling Basin in the past, and that its future management is transparent, open and equitable to all Australians living in the Murray-Darling Basin.

Mary J. Chandler
September 11, 2008

- commissioning scoping studies to identify critical knowledge gaps and provide guidance on research priorities
- providing grants to research programs addressing issues such as the formation of acid sulfate sediments, water requirements for native fish populations and the use of aerial surveys of waterbirds as indications for wetland health
- supporting environmental water managers by establishing a 'community of practice' where they can share experiences
- undertaking trials of a national framework for assessing river and wetland health (FARWH), with the intention that an agreed framework will be delivered in 2011.

Future directions for water-dependent ecosystems

The Commission will continue to build on these activities. However improved knowledge alone will not ensure that environmental outcomes are achieved. The Commission has therefore adopted the following six priorities to guide future work involving the management of water-dependent ecosystems:

1. *Help develop and implement national guidelines and procedures for determining environmentally sustainable levels of extraction of water.* A nationally agreed method will expedite the formulation of water plans that protect water-dependent ecosystems and include a pathway to recover overallocated systems. The methods will include guidelines for establishing clear environmental outcomes.
2. *Pursue an agreed national inventory of over-allocated water systems together with commitments by governments to return them to sustainable levels of extraction.* Identifying overallocated systems and recording agreed actions to recover the water needed to restore sustainability is central to achieving environmental outcomes contained in the NWI.
3. *Improve the security of environmental water.* In spite of the legislation now passed in all jurisdictions, environmental water allocations often lack specificity and there is uncertainty around the status and security of environmental water holdings.
4.

Support more effective management of environmental water. There are many shortcomings in the governance and operations of environmental water managers. Statutory empowerment, funding, skills and access to science, data and best practice guidelines all require urgent attention. The development of a national community of practice in environmental water management is an important initiative that will support these water managers.

5.

Strengthen the role of adaptive management of environmental water. Recent work commissioned by the Commission1 showed there is a deficiency in monitoring and reporting on plan implementation. This is a significant weakness when coupled with gaps in ecological knowledge and the occurrence of climatic conditions outside the planned-for circumstances. More systematic monitoring and reporting is essential to enable the water management regime to be adapted intelligently in the light of experience.

6.

Implement the Framework for the Assessment of River and Wetland Health. While the Commission will continue to support the implementation of the Framework for the Assessment of River and Wetland Health, its successful adoption rests with the parties to the National Water Initiative Agreement.

By pursuing these priorities, the Commission will play its part in promoting the enduring objective of the National Water Initiative to manage water–dependent ecosystems to best effect. We urge the parties to the National Water Initiative Agreement to do likewise.

National Water Commission

1 September 2008

1 Hamstead M., Baldwin, C. and O'Keefe, V. (2008) Water allocation planning in Australia – current practices and lessons learned. Waterline Occassional Paper No. 6, April 2008. National Water Commission.