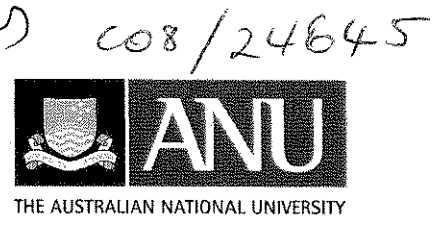
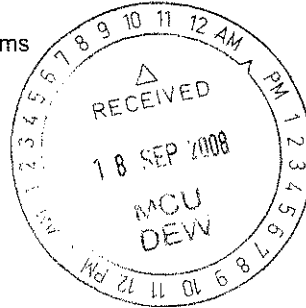


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16 September 2008

Senator Penny Wong
 Minister for Climate Change and Water
 Parliament House
 Canberra, ACT2600

Dear Senator Wong,

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee for Water Management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes — Implications for the Long Term Sustainable Management of the Murray Darling Basin System.

I wish to suggest that serious consideration be given to another option to assist in the rescue plan for the Coorong and Lower River Murray Lakes (Alexandria and Albert). This option does not appear from press reports to have been considered to date. However I believe it could be a better solution to those currently under consideration in terms of its practicality, cost effectiveness, and long term environmental management. The problem being considered by the Committee is an acutely serious and urgent one from both the human and environmental management perspectives. However, I do not believe that the problems arising from increasing salinity and acidity as water levels drop in the Lakes can be readily solved from the proposals currently under examination as the water required from the River Murray Darling Basin (RMDB) is just not available, bearing in mind that only about one-fifth of the water released from upstream in the Basin reaches its mouth. The level of permits (already substantially reduced) for water consumption for human use and minimal irrigation (4292GL) currently exceeds the water available (3949GL) and this precludes releases for environmental purposes (Australian Financial Review, 3 Sept 2008, P5). Water from a new source must be found to ease the problem.

I propose that serious consideration be given to shipping water from Lake Argyle in the Kimberley region of NW Australia to the Lakes and Coorong. I believe this is a viable option which could be implemented reasonably soon. I have been made aware of this possibility in my discussions with an officer on an oil tanker operating in Australia. The following points are pertinent for its use:

- There is a surplus of single-hulled oil tankers around the world, many of which are lying idle in SE Asia. This results from the recently introduced requirement that oil tankers must now be double-hulled ships. The tankers are available in sizes up to around 300,000 tonnes, and they should be leasable on generous terms, given that they are lying idle.
- It takes about 36 hours to load and unload a 300,000 tonne tanker.
- They can be loaded and unloaded when anchored up to two miles from the loading/unloading point, using flexible hose-lines for the purpose. Hence the tankers can anchor offshore to load the water from Lake Argyle on the Ord River and discharge it into the Lakes.
- Water tankers will not require cleaning after each trip, as do oil tankers. It takes about one week to clean them. This reduces operational costs and speeds up their turnaround. Existing oil tankers would be cleaned before being used as water tankers.
- Lake Argyle is an enormous fresh water Lake on the Ord River above Kununurra. It is stated to hold about 25 times the volume of water in Sydney Harbour, and during the peak wet season the Ord could fill Sydney Harbour in 12 hours. It is reputed to have the second highest flow rate in the world, behind the Amazon. Most of the water flows into the Timor Sea, as less than 10% of it is used for town supply and irrigation.
- There is a hydro-electric station by the dam wall. This may need enlarging to provide additional pumping capacity for filling the water tankers anchored in the River mouth. The tanker's own pumps would be used to pump the water ashore.
- It would take about 10 days to sail from Kununurra to the Murray mouth. With loading and unloading time, a ship could do the round trip in 24 days. If four tankers were leased, four deliveries could be made each month.
- The tankers could be operated for about 9 months each year during the dry season; it could be dangerous to use them during the monsoon period.

- By taking only some of the surplus water from Lake Argyle and the Ord River, which flows into the Timor Sea, there should be no detrimental environmental consequences. Hence it would be a sustainable environmental option.
- The costs of shipping water would be considerably less than for oil. Oil tanker insurance costs are high because of fire risks and environmental pollution costs in the event of accidents, and avoidance of regular cleaning costs and faster tanker turnaround times for water tankers. But even for oil, the direct shipping costs are apparently a very modest component of total costs.
- Water tankers are regularly used to ship water across the Mediterranean Sea from European countries to North African countries.

I regret I cannot provide the Committee with comprehensive factual information for this option as all the financial information is commercial-in-confidence data. My feeling is that say 4 tankers providing 4 loads of 300,000 tonnes operating over 9 months each year would make a significant contribution to resolution of the problem. This would provide about 1.2 GL of water per month or 11 GL over the year.


I suggest that some senior management personnel in the oil transportation industry be consulted to obtain their information and advice. The West Australian Government would also need to be consulted and their support obtained. I would be surprised if this option were not preferable to the ones currently under consideration. There appears to be sufficient surplus water from Lake Argyle and the Ord River to assist the Lower Murray region, whose water needs are real and urgent. Furthermore, the Ord is only one of five rivers in the Kimberley which discharge enormous flows into the Timor Sea, and it is possible that surplus water could also be obtained in due course from some of them.

Furthermore, I believe that this option should also be considered as part of the solution to Adelaide's potable water supplies problem. Adelaide currently obtains 80 per cent of its water from the River Murray. Desalination plants are very power-hungry, expensive to construct and operate, and cause substantial environmental damage to the surrounding coastlines.

Hence I strongly urge the Committee to consider the Lake Argyle option and seek reliable information on it before formulating your report and making recommendations. The problem is an immense, complex and urgent one, involving a host of considerations. It is vital that the best solutions are obtained for the long term sustainable management of the RMDB system which encompass both human needs for water and environmental management needs. While this option will not completely solve the problem it will alleviate it by providing some new additional water to the Lakes, and progressively reduce it over the longer term.

With my best wishes for your deliberations,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Allan Barton".

Allan Barton

P.S. I am happy to be interviewed by the Committee if you so wish. However I shall be away from Canberra until 6 October.