

Chapter 9

Conclusions

Introduction

9.1 This chapter reviews the committee's conclusions on the first part of the inquiry into water management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes and outlines the committee's conclusions for its inquiry into the long term sustainable management of the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB or Basin). It is appropriate to reiterate the committee's views on water management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes, given that evidence and submissions from the first part of the inquiry formed the basis of the second part of the inquiry.

Coorong and Lower Lakes

9.2 The committee restates those Coalition recommendations from the Water Management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes (including consideration of the Emergency Water (Murray-Darling Basin Rescue) Bill 2008) Report, which are relevant to this inquiry, and are extracted below. The committee refers to appropriate parts of the aforementioned report, for the committee's basis for making each of these recommendations.

9.3 That the Government immediately develop and release an economic and social impact statement and evidence of a strategy to guide water buybacks, infrastructure spending and other measures to be undertaken so as to provide certainty and transparency for all stakeholders in the system (Recommendation 8).

9.4 That the Government hasten both on-farm and off-farm infrastructure spending where it delivers water savings and increased environmental flows while enhancing both food security and the viability of regional communities (Recommendation 9).

9.5 That a full and unconditional referral of powers to the Australian Government over management of the Basin be undertaken by all relevant state and territory jurisdictions to deliver a river and basin system able to be governed nationally, consistently, transparently and equitably (Recommendation 10).

9.6 That the Federal and New South Wales Governments immediately assess new ways to secure the water supply for Broken Hill and, where environmentally appropriate, re-engineer the Menindee Lakes to reduce evaporative losses (Recommendation 11).

9.7 That the Australian and South Australian Governments commit to self sufficiency independent of the Murray for Adelaide as a key objective of their water

policy plans through increased efficiency in water usage and greater efforts in areas such as stormwater capture, desalination and water recycling (Recommendation 12).

9.8 That construction of the North-South Pipeline to extract water for Melbourne not proceed (Recommendation 13).

9.9 The committee also reiterates the following observation from its earlier report:

The committee notes the unsatisfactory timeframes which currently exist for the transfer of water which arise out of existing barriers to trade and inefficient water registers.¹

The long term sustainable management of the Murray-Darling Basin

9.10 The long-term sustainable management of the MDB presents significant challenges for the Australian Government and the governments of the Basin States and Territory.

9.11 The most critical challenge is the on-going scarcity of water in the MDB.

9.12 There are no quick fixes for bringing more water into the MDB. However, what is required is a policy designed to ensure that the water which is available in a manner that is consistent with the long-term viability and sustainability of the MDB.

9.13 The committee commends the work of governments, farmers, scientists, conservationists and the community in general to address this issue.

9.14 The committee supports the governance structure that the Australian Government has put in place for the MDB, through the Intergovernmental Agreement on Murray-Darling Basin Reform (IGA) and the *Water Act 2007*, which the role of the Commonwealth and the States and Territory in the management of the Basin.

9.15 The committee recognises that there is significant support in the community for a Commonwealth take-over of the MDB. The committee's view is that a Commonwealth take-over of the management of the MDB is not appropriate. The committee reiterates its view that what is required right now is cooperation between the Commonwealth and the Basin States and Territory to ensure the long-term sustainability of the MDB.

9.16 The committee also supports the development and the implementation of the Basin Plan in the timeframes set out in the IGA.

9.17 The committee appreciates that the timeframes in place for the development and implementation of the Basin Plan are seen by some in the community as taking

1 Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport, Water management in the Coorong and Lower Lakes (including consideration of the Emergency Water (Murray-Darling Basin Rescue) Bill 2008, October 2008, p. 50.

too long to fix this urgent problem. However, the committee's view is that the quality of the Basin Plan should not be compromised through the truncation of the development and implementation process.

9.18 There are significant environmental assets in the Basin. The committee is aware that many of these are under significant ecological stress. The committee believes that the reforms put in place under the Australian Government's *Water for the Future* policy and the development of the Environmental Watering Plan as part of the Basin Plan appear to address many of the concerns raised in the course of this inquiry.

9.19 However, the committee is concerned that the rate of deterioration of some significant environmental assets in the MDB is occurring at a pace which means that they will have undergone irreparable damage by the time the Environmental Watering Plan is completed and implemented. For this reason, the committee has made recommendations as to processes that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority should put in place to ensure the protection of key environmental assets in the MBD prior to the implementation of the Basin Plan.

9.20 The committee is concerned about the long-term management of Ramsar wetlands in the MDB. The committee has therefore recommended improving the management of Ramsar wetlands through better coordination and cooperation between the government bodies responsible for these sites.

9.21 Climate change presents new challenges to the MDB, in addition to the current scarcity of water. The committee commends the CSIRO on the work of the *Sustainable Yields Report*. The committee notes that the Australian Government intends to use this information to inform policy development in the future.

9.22 The committee also recognises that climate change is one of only a number of risks to the water resources of the MDB. Unregulated harvesting of overland flows and water theft are two risks which the committee considered in the course of this inquiry.

9.23 The committee notes the work of the New South Wales and Queensland governments on the regulation of harvesting of overland water flows. The committee urges all governments to ensure that regulatory regimes for the management of overland flows are supported by adequate resources for compliance and monitoring.

Senator Fiona Nash
Committee Chair

