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Committee Secretary,
Senate Standing Committee On Rural Affairs and Transport
P.O. Box 6100- Parliament House,
Canberra. ACT 2600.

Attention Committee Secretary.

I am an owner and manager of B&W Rural a large rural merchandising business in Moree New South Wales. I am writing to express some thoughts on the MDBA draft plan.

B&W Rural employs 25 permanent staff and up to 30 part-time casuals (usually university students) over summer. We are totally dependent on agriculture and until the drought commenced we were approximately 50% reliant on irrigated agriculture. I have a son who also wishes to come back to work in the business.

B&W Rural are involved at many levels in the community. Individually many of our staff are involved in such community projects as the new Botanic Gardens, Gwydir Industries and many of the sporting and other cultural associations in Moree and district. As a business we sponsor a very wide range of activities in the community.

Our business has already been very hard hit by the first round of water cuts both River water and bore water as well as the drought which occurred at the same time. Our staffing levels have been cut particularly the employment of university students as `bugcheckers in irrigated cotton, sorghum, soybeans etc. From 30 when cotton was close to a full plant we have been as low as one and two during the drought and subsequent water cuts. This casual employment is fantastic training for university students aiming for a career in agriculture.

I am deeply concerned about the effects that the MDBA plan would have on our business and our community if it went ahead. I can see it reducing employment in B&W Rural and the wider Moree community which has a dramatic flow on effect in health, education and other community services. One of the biggest employment impacts will be in the area of farm labour which is a large employer in the local aboriginal community. With the massive strides that have been made over the last 10 years in aboriginal employment and the consequent improvement in community relations it would be a very retrograde step to upset this process. I have seen some of the analysis of the science involved at the Gwydir Valley level and believe that some of the underlying science behind the plan for the Gwydir Valley is severely flawed.

I believe that the environment in the Gwydir Valley has been classed as severely degraded because of the percentage of outflow into the wider Murray Darling basin system. As an agronomist who has probably set foot on nearly every farm and conservation area in the Valley I would dispute that it is severely degraded and suggest that the criteria chosen is once again flawed.

I am certainly in favour of improvements in irrigation technology as a key part of the water saving plan. These improvements must also apply to the bodies who supervise environmental flows as I think they are much less efficient than the irrigators in gaining their objectives.

I think that in a flood time such as now water will be readily available to replenish environmental areas as it has done for millions of years. The environmental areas are used to this regime and respond accordingly. In those years where large flood events do not occur it will not be possible to maintain the whole river system in a pristine state and I think the wider community must decide at what stage and how much money they really want to spend on maintaining some of the thousands of wetlands in the system. I think that in time these areas must be rated on environmental value and the wider community must decide which ones are to be “artificially” maintained and which ones must survive under the natural regime which has been in place for millions of years.

I think that your committee should take the opportunity to come to Moree and discuss the issues as part of the evaluation process. Without a much better understanding of the key issues from a scientific, socioeconomic and political perspective decisions could be made on the basis of the draft plan which will devastate our community and provide no real environmental value.

Yours faithfully,

Peter Birch
B.Ag. Sci