MURRAY VALLEY WATER DIVERTERS ADVISORY ASSOCIATION (NSW) INC

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Submission to Murray Darling Basin Authority

Guide to the Draft of the Proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan
November 2010

The MVWDAA supports the NSWIC Submission as a detailed, critical analysis.

However, our Submission will be more as a local, grass-roots reaction to a proposal totally out of step with reality. This current Submission follows our input to the Issues Paper (November 2009) which had a series of suggestions and requests – which have been totally ignored and not even responded to.

No wonder Basin communities are totally disillusioned with this whole process. Perhaps the single, largest indictment of the MDBA was to release to the city media the obviously fatuous statement of an estimate of 800 job losses across the Basin, with the removal from productive use of 3000GLs of water as their stated minimum.

This intentionally misleading statement was floated at the time of the Guide's release, with the obvious intent to allay any concerns that may arise in the minds of the ill-informed urban population.

The message delivered to the MDBA throughout the Basin has been consistent and clear. The Plan is totally flawed in being able to deliver an outcome that balances the interests of the environment's real needs with the future productivity of a Basin that underpins Australia's food production and security. It also fails the acknowledge the obvious, horrendous social and regional devastation, which will inevitably flow on to the Nation as a whole, if the actions proposed were ever implemented.

For the MDBA to hide behind the totally biased 2007 Water Act, which contravenes the principles laid down in the NWI under the COAG Agreement, and to not publicly state to the Federal Government that unless the Act is amended the outcome will be unbalanced and against the National interest, is an indictment of the senior personnel and Board of the MDBA.

In any country except Australia, which has lost its way, it would be considered an act of treason for anybody to knowingly promote something against the National interest.

The Water Amendment Bill 2008

Within a year of the Water Act 2007, it was realised that it so over-stated the priority of the environment that in times of drought or low River flows, cities like Adelaide and Canberra and numerous other towns and farm households, could be starved of water. The Act failed to take into account the 'critical human needs' factor.

Hence, the Water Amendment Bill 2008 was passed – in large part to ensure the 'critical human needs' in times of low water availability. It showed that politicians can act quickly – if urban water is seen to be threatened.

Let the MDBA now do what it should have done at the outset as an independent body, and that is to inform Government that the Act must again be amended for a balanced outcome and to comply with the NWI COAG Agreement.

It is obvious that the same methodology and modelling which was so discredited as a totally flawed process , having 90% error factors in the science behind the Living Murray, has once again been used to portray a list of so-called degraded rivers that need saving. Promoting SDLs based on CSIRO modelling which once again have not been subject to outside scientific and hydrological scrutiny, is not good enough. Even State Government water departments have not been privy to the data and assumptions used. They and regional communities should have had a major input into this process. The people who live in the Basin know that the rivers are not 'degraded', but have been enduring a drought cycle which has occurred before and will occur again. Even Prof Peter Cullen on the Sunday TV Program shortly before his death, had to admit - quote … "Well, yes the rivers are in quite good health!"

The Basin's health has nothing to do with over-allocation and over-extraction. For all of this drought sequence, extractions have been very low to zero whilst the rivers have had water flowing for the entire duration of the drought! Under natural conditions, without the foresight of storages, these same rivers would have ceased to flow for much of the drought period. This happened on a number of documented occasions prior to the construction of storage dams.

As with the Lake Eyre inflow events, the breaking of the drought this year has seen a massive restoration of environmental values. Let's get real - rivers don't die! They go through periods of stress and bounty in Australia's extremely variable rainfall and flow regimes.

River Health

All of the main indicators show improvement – not decline.

Salinity levels at Morgan, SA (the accepted monitoring point) have been declining for 20 years and are now at pre-WWII levels. Nutrient loads, both nitrates and phosphates, are static or declining. Native fish numbers are dramatically up and carp numbers are down. Turbidity levels have declined along with decline in the carp population.

Consequently, the assertion that all the Basin's rivers, bar the Paroo and Wimmera, are in a degraded state must be subject to serious, independent, scientific analysis. Any identified stress will most likely be due to the extended drought – irrigator extractions have been minimal or zero over this period.

The Over-Allocation Myth

It is critical that this myth be put to rest! There is obvious confusion at political, bureaucratic, media and urban levels on this issue.

State Governments issued the 'licences/entitlements' to water, BUT the use of these licences/ entitlements has to be triggered by the granting of 'allocations'. Allocations (as a percentage of licence), are granted seasonally by governments in accordance with the available water in the Basin system. This is how variability is dealt with when water is short – allocations are low or non-existent.

The government's action in granting or not granting allocations is governed by a 'Water Sharing Plan' for each irrigation river in the Basin. These Plans take account of water availability for environmental, livestock and domestic needs before irrigation extractions are allowed. Whilst Water Sharing Plans are hotly debated by people pursuing various competing needs, it is a most sensible and effective approach.

This explanation was articulated in an article dated 26 October 2010 by David Boyd, now retired CEO/Managing Director of Clyde Agriculture. In effect, it is more an issue of levels of reliability.

Menindee Lakes and The Lower Lakes

It is incredible to have the MDBA and governments carrying on about relatively minor water savings in the Menindee Lakes system (which we agree with), but at the same time fail to quickly focus on the obvious which is to build the originally planned regulator between Menindee and Cawndilla Lakes. There is also a failure to acknowledge that although the Menindee Lakes system has a high evaporation factor, it is the first water used and this minimises the evaporation losses.

Even more damning is the failure to address the massive, on-going losses incurred in the Basin river system by sustaining an artificial, fresh-water lake system at the bottom end of the Basin (ie Lakes Alexandrina and Albert). This is particularly so in a drought sequence, when they could revert to their natural estuarine state at such times.

The unforgiveable mismanagement of our water resources (annual evaporation loss of up to and over 1 million MLs), wiped out 50 dairy farms around the Lower Lakes, approximately 30% of the horticulture in the Riverland and Sunraysia areas, approximately 60'% of the dairy farms in the upper areas and a devastating impact on irrigated grazing and cropping enterprises with the rice industry virtually shutting down.

The tragedy is that, but for government inertia, none of this had to happen. If the losses in the Lower Lakes had been minimised, as agreed by then CEO of the MDBC at the beginning of the drought, through the building of a weir at Wellington and piping of water to adjacent areas, more production could have continued.

All of South Australia's real needs for Adelaide, towns, industry, and irrigation could have been met (approximately 800,000 MLs). The savings of 1 million MLs could have been held in the upper storages and would have provided approximately 25 – 30% additional allocation during each year of the drought for the upper States. This would have prevented the devastation of farms, industries and regions that so needlessly occurred.

Of course, this means suspending the Water Sharing Plan agreement in a drought sequence. This was, in fact, done during this most recent drought. However, the Lower Lakes dried out needlessly when the obvious solution in the form of removal of the barrage boards (following construction of the Wellington weir) was resisted. The Lower Lakes could have interacted with the sea through the Coorong – the previously natural state.

The proposed freshwater solution for the Lakes aims to perpetuate the loss of approximately 1 million MLs annually - even in a drought sequence. This would result in little or no irrigation water once again in such periods.

Contrary to frequent political statements, this is not a South Australian State issue – it is a national issue. Clearly, the main driver for the recovery of water from productive use primarily from the upper States is not environmental concerns, but fresh water for the Lower Lakes.

Louise Burge's paper on the Lower Lakes and Coorong clearly articulates the facts relating to this critical issue. A number of articles by the scientist Dr Jennifer Marahosy do the same.

I challenged Mike Taylor at the recent Deniliquin and Moama MDBA meetings about the MDBA asking the upper States to reconfigure their irrigation industries at massive cost in order to fix something that has not been established as actually needing a fix and that the Lower Lakes must have their future status given full consideration. He conceded the points needed addressing.

We must hold the MDBA and governments to this position. Unless we win this fundamental issue, the potential is for the upper States to lose massive amounts of water for no purpose other than to be evaporated from the freshwater playground that is the Lower Lakes, Hindmarsh Island villas and marinas.

Finally, the points raised and requests made in the MVWDAA Submission of November 2009 still stand if we are going to progress this issue to any conclusion acceptable by Basin communities.

Neil Eagle
Chairman
22 November 2010