# Submission to the Senate Rural Affairs and Transport References Committee into the Management of the Murray Darling Basin and the Developmentand Implementation of the Plan

by Dr. John B. Cox, Citrus Grower, Waikerie, SA November 25, 2010

At the Melbourne community meeting of the MDBA, I confirmed with the panel that under anticipated average rainfall conditions across the basin, no consideration of interception storages and a minimum cut of 3,000 GL to be taken from irrigators, the changes resulting from the proposed draft basin plan would be as follows:

| | Present Allocations | After Irrigation Cuts |
|---|---|---|
| Irrigation allowance | 11,000 GL | 8,000 GL |
| Environment - within basin | 14,000 GL | 15,000 GL |
| Environment - flow to sea | 5,000 GL | 7,000 GL |
| Total Environment allowance | 19,000 GL | 22,000 GL |
| Percentage allocation to the environment | 63% | 73% |

The speakers at this Melbourne meeting therefore confirmed that of the 3,000 GL of cuts to irrigators an amount of 1,000 GL would be added to the 14,000 GL already being used by the environment within the basin and an additional 2,000 GL will be added to the 5,000 GL already flowing into the sea.

Irrigators such as myself just cannot see how Basin sustainability is significantly improved by cutting their total basin allocations to 8,000 GL so as to allow 7,000 GL to flow down the River Murray canal in SA, without overflowing its banks, and out of the Murray mouth.

The holy grail of the basin guide, and also of the Wentworth Group, is that end-of- system flows improve sustainability. This may be the case for some rivers but the River Murray has been a working river for over 80 years and it is nonsense to try and return it to a natural river.

I would guess that metropolitan residents would protest just as vigorously as irrigators if the dams on the rivers around their cities were suddenly opened to provide 50% of their natural end-of-system flows and that they would have to cut their consumption by 27 to 37%.

A cost-benefit analysis of the return of end of system flows to a working river would surely show the mindlessness of this - and should be done. Like the National Broadband network, a policy such as this draft guide has proposed with so much economic dislocation should be the subject of a thorough economic analysis with the environmental benefits compared against the economic cost resulting from this reduction in irrigation allowances.

**********

The empirical evidence of the last drought does not prove the importance of these end-of-system flows for the long term environmental health of the River Murray.

Even though there have been flows of less than 1,000 GL into the Lower Lakes since 2003 and very little flow into the sea, there has been no problem with salinity along the Murray, even for drinking water for Adelaide being pumped from Mannum.

Moreover, the Coorong will not be a beneficiary of any further end-of system flows as this is a closed backwater and any additional water will flow straight out of the mouth.

Most irrigators living along the Murray have not noticed very much difference in the environment along the River during the drought. There certainly has not been "a devastating impact" as this report states. The Australian environment is hardier than we give credit for as it has adapted to droughts and flooding rains over its evolutionary history. Think Lake Eyre.

There have been many stressed river red gums along the River during the drought but a Forests NSW report indicated that while about 50 - 70% of gums in NSW were stressed, there was no reduction in forest area of 401,00 ha and there was only a 1% tree mortality rate. The recent flooding of the Barmah-Millewa forests will bring these red gums back pretty quickly.

Irrigated agricultural crops do not have this same resistance to droughts and flooding rains as the Australian environment and there has been "a devastating impact" here. The drought in the Murray Darling Basin decreased the irrigated area by half between 2005/06 and 2007/08, some700,000 ha. In one small industry in SA there has been a reduction of 14% of all citrus plantings and the removal of 400,000 trees.

**********

The major failing of this report, and all of the Wentworth Group analyses, is that there has been no scientific analysis of how the present 19,000 GL of water used by the environment could be more efficiently used to achieve the same environmental outcomes as a cut in irrigation diversions.

Irrigators have improved their efficiency of water use by over 15% in these drought years. If environmentalists could do the same then 3,000 GL of the present environmental use of 19,000 GL would be saved and no irrigation cuts would be needed.

There have been many studies of how irrigators can use their water more efficiently. Moreover, there are rigorous audits of water use by irrigators every year to ensure that caps are not exceeded. However, I have not seen any comprehensive study on how this 63% of total runoff from the basin for environmental purposes has been used efficiently and effectively.

If irrigators have been forced to improve their efficiency of water use, then why should we not demand that environmentalists do the same? A great deal of this efficient use of water by irrigators has been due to the establishment of a market based trading system for the transfer of water. Surely a water trading system for environmental water should also be established so that this water is allocated to the most demanding of environmental uses, depending on it's value to the environment.

**********

Australians only feel a sense of well being when they believe that governments are providing them with a complete package of economic, health, environmental and social outcomes and are not just focusing on one outcome only.

Most public opinion polls find that people give a weighting of about 60% to economic outcomes and about 10 to 15% each for health, social and environmental outcomes. The guide, in stressing environmental outcomes at the expense of these others, therefore runs counter to what most electorates around Australia want from their government.

In the last election only about 12% of all Green voters and 1 out of 156 electorates gave the same dominance to green issues as is imbedded in this Basin Plan guide. This dominance places plants and animals ahead of the needs of real human beings.

In this situation, whose charter is it to look after the other economic, social and health outcomes - and therefore the total well being of communities in the Murray Darling Basin? Hopefully, our politicians such as are on this committee will shoulder this responsibility.

Australia has always been a land of the fair go and it is patently unfair for communities in the Murray Darling basin to have their well being threatened by a charter which places environmental outcomes ahead of all the other economic, social and health outcomes which people in all other parts of the country take as granted.

Dr. John B. Cox,