Urban Taskforce
AUSTRALIA

8 December 2010

Ms Jeanette Radcliffe
Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By e-mail: rat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Radcliffe

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into the Management of the Murray-Darling Basin

The Urban Taskforce is a non-profit organisation representing Australia's most prominent property developers and equity financiers. We provide a forum for people involved in the development and planning of the urban environment, to engage in constructive dialogue with government and the community.

The notion that environmental considerations should always trump social and economic concerns has been popular with green pressure groups and some policy-makers for many years. Occasionally, the stars align for these groups, and legislation is enacted that compels governments to ignore the non-environmental consequences when they make decisions. It's a problem with some threatened species laws and it has clearly become a problem with the administration of the federal Water Act.[1]

It does not need to be this way. "Ecologically sustainable development" requires environmental, social and economic factors to be considered together in an integrated decision-making process.[2] No single factor should be elevated above all others or disregarded.

The Australian Environment Act: A report into the Report of the Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999 was released by the Federal Government on 21 December 2009. The report was the result of a 14 month review by Dr Alan Hawke.[3] The review embraced the naive notion that environmental considerations must always win out over other public policy goals. This Act has the potential to regulate almost every major land use decision across Australia, so such tinkering could have wide ramifications.

Mr Hawke's review proposed that the Commonwealth abandon the approach to ecologically sustainable development that has been in use since 1992. It said that environmental issues should be given first priority, and that significant social and economic issues be reduced to mere second-order considerations.[4]

Recommendation 2(2) says:

> The Review recommends that the Act ... emphasise that environmental considerations are to be considered first when making decisions under the Act.[5]

If this proposal were to be adopted we could see the expansion of our cities halted on the flimsiest of environmental arguments.

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[1] See: "Storm brews over Murray after water boss quits", *The Australian*, 8 December 2010, 1.
[2] Commonwealth of Australia, *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development* (1992). <http://environment.gov.au/about/esd/publications/strategy/intro.html#WIESD>

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[3] The final report is available here <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/review/publications/pubs/final-report.pdf>.
[4] Paragraph 1.32, page 53; Recommendation 2(2), page 55;
[5] Page 55.

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The accepted approach to ecologically sustainable development requires environmental, social and economic factors to be considered together in an integrated decision-making process. Extreme environment groups have been pushing for unbalanced legislation that requires environmental considerations to always override the needs of ordinary people. It was disappointing that the Hawke review came down on their side.

It seems that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority had, until recently, also succumbed to this view. We hope now that the Federal Government's recent experience with the *Water Act* will lead it to reject this element of the Hawke review.

Yours sincerely
Urban Taskforce Australia

Aaron Gadiel
Chief Executive Officer