COUNTRY WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES

SUBMISSION – Senate Inquiry into the Management of the Murray Darling Basin

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9 December 2010

STATEMENT

The Murray Darling Basin (MDB) is a large portion of the States of NSW, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia. It is necessary to achieve a healthy MDB with all interests in the basin taken into account. There is a general recognition that change in the management of the MDP needs to occur.

All communities covered by the proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan (MDBP) must be assured of the security of their future livelihoods. The social and economic implications of potential job losses with the flow on effect on health services, schools and business cannot be ignored. The CWA of NSW has members who are farmers, business people, city dwellers, environmentalists, food and fibre producers (to name just a few). The CWA believe that all these interests must be taken into account when decisions are made concerning the MDB to balance the needs of all users.

WATER ACT 2007

Under the Water Act 2007 the Murray Darling Basin Authority is required to "promote the use and management of the basin water resources in a way that clearly optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes". This Guide to the Plan clearly fails this objective. We note that under the mandatory decisions required by the Water Act there is no requirement for anything other than environmental determinations. Surely the government must recognise that environmental outcomes at the cost of human life, community viability and economic prosperity are not sustainable.

There appears to be little recognition that the flow on effects from this legislation will be significant. If we lose water we lose productive capacity we lose income and the ability to mitigate risk through diversification. We face the prospect of smaller gross margins which make some farms unviable which will lead to farms being sold and families moving away from country towns.

ENVIRONMENT

How do you define a healthy river? Does it flow naturally? Go dry in periods of low rainfall? Does it flood in periods of high rainfall? Should it have more dams to increase security for all users?

Some of our members believe that more storage points are necessary. Will this need for more storage be addressed? What affect will more storage have on the environment? Dams have been constructed, therefore we are already a managed environment. What affect do the

Barrages have on the amount of environmental water needed to go the South Australia?

Some rivers in the northern part of the basin are smaller than suggested in the Guide.

A healthy river requires management of both land and water, not just adding more water to an area. The management of land is not included in the Water Act or in the MDBA's terms of reference, but land management is vital before any proposed extra water is given to the environment.

All areas of the environment have been badly affected during the drought of 2001-2009, not only the "18 chosen sites" in the Guide but all pasture areas which rely on rain for growth have suffered. Floodplains are also part of the environment. Decisions are being made on how much water is need for the system using these drought figures which show a disposition for continual low rainfall and not the wide variations that occur. The present wet period being experienced in the Basin has reinvigorated the entire landscape more than any plan can do. A balanced approached therefore must be taken.

With the proposed environmental water increases, what accountability does this environmental water have? At present there is no charge on environmental water. This poses a question; who pays for the infrastructure costs with the proposed "cuts" to irrigation water users?

The environment does not exist in a vacuum and every section of flora and fauna (as well as humans) interact and require due consideration.

WATER SHARING PLANS

Water Sharing Plans were prepared in each valley by a group of informed persons in that particular valley (with help from the Government Agencies). They took many months to prepare with the agreement of all parties affected in the respective valleys.
During the drought these Plans were put on hold, with the Water Minister of the day making the decisions on the various rivers.

The above plans were not really given a chance to be implemented fully, to see if the decisions for that valley were correct and would benefit all the users in that valley (environmental, irrigation industry, grazing and farming interests, affects of flooding on farms, towns to name some)and they did lead to sustainable withdrawal limits. These plans are due for review in NSW in 2014 and in Victoria in 2019. Could

these plans be allowed to function until 2014 for all states and reviewed at that date to see where faults lie in those valleys? This would then allow the work done to date on the MDB validated with figures from each valley tested for affects from the Water Sharing Plans.

Individual valleys need individual discussion on its proposed needs both for the environment and the people who live and work in those respective valleys.

AFFECTS ON COMMUNITIES WITH PROPOSED SDL'S

Rural and regional communities have already made significant adjustments as a result of efficiencies gained from improved farming techniques. These efficiencies have meant fewer jobs. The success of most businesses operating in rural communities depends on a viable population base.

If the Guide's suggested "cuts" of 3000gL 3.5gL or 7000gLs are to be found for the environment, many communities will be badly affected. Warren, Deniliquin, Coleambally, Bourke and Hillston (to name only some towns) may become welfare dependant towns due to the increase of population drift to the larger regional towns or the coastal fringe. This will lead to fewer children at our schools, less money being spent in the towns, reduced need for hospitals, doctors, transport operators and farm workers with a flow on effect. It may even lead to the closure of the CWA branches.

The security of the lives of these people may be in jeopardy. Environmental systems in the Basin may rebound quickly following extended dry periods or major changes in water regimes but regional and rural communities once dislocated take generations to recover

With 98% of the Australian population living within 20 Km radius of the coast, what increased pressure is being imposed on this coastal environment?

Tourism has been suggested as an alternative income producer but this is not a viable option for many "far flung" areas. The weather is a factor to consider, road conditions and the number of facilities available for tourists are limited in the Western areas of NSW. Will tourism return to the communities the income they have enjoyed in the past? It is doubtful. Yanga Station, purchased for $35 million by the NSW State Government in 2005 to replace the Red Gum industry, was expected to receive 50,000 visitors a year. To date with $4.5

million spent improving facilities to world class standards, only just under 6000 people were counted visiting over a 6 month period.

Mental health has become a big problem over the drought years and will only be escalated with the insecurity and uncertainty of decisions regarding community and personal futures.

We are concerned that if the MDBA can manipulate data so that they claim only 800 people will be displaced, the general public and indeed the Government should question what other data has been manipulated.

PRODUCTION OF FOOD AND FIBRE

The MDBA claims that the Basin's gross value for irrigated agriculture is 13% of current gross value; however it admits that there are data difficulties. The Government of Australia has a responsibility to enact policy that does not rely on information with data difficulties with such significant impacts.

At present Australia is a major importer of food. Australia has strict rules about the production of food and fibre particularly its affect on the environment. As a nation we are concerned that our environment is pristine and healthy. Healthy environments can exist in conjunction with sound farming and regional towns. As Australians, we pride ourselves on the quality of our food and fibre and the care that is taken to ensure that this can continue for generations to come.

While producing food to import to Australia what is happening to the environment of the countries that are producing these commodities? Do they have set controls as in Australia or are they destroying their environment to produce food for Australia? We live in a Global Village today, so caring for the environment concerns the world's peoples, and destruction of environments elsewhere in the world will affect our environment too.

Food prices are due to increase. With increased pressure on food prices, this will ultimately create problems for all Australians. Much of the imported food is cheaper than we can produce in Australia but when we can't produce enough food for our own needs and must import, the country of origin will be able to charge what it likes and we will have to pay to eat.

Australia is an island country and as such is vulnerable if it isn't able to at least produce enough food and fibre for its population. Food security surely is vital for Australia.

GROUND WATER

The Australian Government has indicated it will purchase the gap between final and current SDLs to willing sellers, but not for Groundwater. We seek clarification around the potential payments and compensation for groundwater licence holders

There is concern from some of our members on the "cuts" to ground water as these members have already lost some of their water allocation earlier and are wondering how, with the development of infrastructure on their farms, they will be able to meet mortgages, put in crop and pay for family needs.

FINANCE

With all the uncertainty of water distribution many are concerned about the value of their properties now and their ability to borrow money. Problems with servicing debt and the destruction of equity of both financial institutions and business owners is a concern to many. This is not the worry of the MDBA but it is a worry for communities awaiting the outcome of changes or proposed changes.

TOWNS

"Critical human water needs" may become an issue. Pages 147-149 of MDBP imply that there is a need for "town dwellers" to cut back on usage of water with only enough water for "essential commerce and industry" (which is not defined), nil watering of gardens, parks and ovals, nil use of evaporative air conditioners and no allowance for economic growth of any kind. The CWA would not be in favour of cuts of this magnitude for towns.

SUMMARY

1. The Environment is very important but the Social and Economic concerns need equal legal standing to give a fair outcome to all groups in the MDB
2. Use of correct data, consider using the Water Sharing Plans already prepared with local input. Need to consult with each individual valley.
3. Concern that South Australia expects too much water from the Northern Rivers
4. Water efficiency saving projects with government grants which would result in water savings given back to the environment.

The idea of a Basin Plan is an excellent one but it must be correct in its assumptions, backed up with correctly tested science and true data with a good outcome for all users.

Please consider the concerns of the CWA of NSW when looking towards decisions which will affect all groups living in the MDB.

Agricultural and Environmental Committee
CWA of NSW