

SUBMISSION ON THE MURRAY DARLING BASIN AUTHORITY

GUIDE TO THE PROPOSED BASIN PLAN

15 December 2010

Background

Moira Shire Council is heavily reliant on the Murray and Goulburn Rivers for irrigated agriculture, particularly dairying, which is the region's largest industry.

As the Murray Darling Basin Plan will impact on the future availability of water in our region Moira Shire Council would like to:-

- work in partnership with the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) to minimise the socio-economic impacts of the plan on our community at a local level.
- maintain a balanced return of water to the Murray River for environmental flows and apply the same approach to protect the needs of our family and community environments.

The Basin Guide is in response to the water Act 2007 (Commonwealth) which requires the Murray Darling Basin Plan to set long term average sustainable diversion limits (SDL's). This means setting limits on the "environmentally sustainable level of the take" for water used for consumptive purposes (drinking water, industry, irrigated agriculture and the like). The MDBA determined that in order to achieve this it would have to reduce SDL's by 3,000 – 4,000 GL/Y. The Guide to the Plan proposes to do this by a percentage cut on water course diversions only (non-consumptive) of between 27 – 37% on average.

The Goulburn – Broken system is identified as receiving a 28 – 45% cut. No explanation is given for the outcome nor is there any attempt to assess the socio-economic impacts associated with such a cut.

Over recent years our Shire has been severely impacted by a decade long drought, the significant reduction in the red gum timber industry due to the State Government's decision

to create Red Gum National Parks and the downturn in the dairy industry. Notwithstanding the proven resilience of our farmers and our communities, the MDBA Plan to mandate new

SDL's has further exacerbated stress levels of our farmers and reduced or delayed investment levels as our people await some indication of certainty in

terms of water resource availability.



Pictured (above): Dairy farm

Council is acutely aware of the need to come to grips with the many changes that have occurred in recent years and the necessity to plan for a positive future for our community. Council is currently in the early stages of budget deliberation for the next financial year but more importantly preparing a comprehensive 10 year financial plan.

Clearly, Council contends that, all potential impacts of the MDBA Plan are factored in and areas for diversification and possible structural assistance identified.

Council believes that local solutions are vital, and in addition Council will need help from the Government to ensure any negative community impacts are minimised.

It is apparent that individual members of our community will make their own submissions to the Authority. Council held public information sessions at Yarrawonga on 9 November, 2010

and Nathalia on 11 November 2010. Following these meetings our community have asked that the MDBA are made aware of the following:-

- our community has almost emerged from a decade long drought. During this period our farming community have battled the drought, State Government unbundling of water, downturn in the dairy industry, increases in Council rates and higher State Government taxes. As a result financial hardship and ongoing uncertainty has had significant impact on our resilient individuals, families and communities. It is apparent that while reduction of agricultural output has been in the main minimised during the decade long drought, this has largely been through increased household debt.



Pictured (above): Harsh drought conditions

The unbalanced approach of the Guide, repeatedly identified by our community at our public information sessions, has been a “massive body blow” to our community that, as always, is trying desperately to look to the future, but is unable and unwilling to plan or commit when faced by such uncertainty.

The ramifications of the Guide will have a significant impact in all rural and regional communities within the Basin, particularly Moira. Clearly this is not a localised farming issue. We contend that this is a local, regional and basin wide issue that will resonate throughout families, businesses, communities, schools and service providers for current and future generations unless the necessary balance and consideration for basin communities is embedded in the process.

Like all communities in the basin our community and Council is committed to our natural environment. As custodians of our (significant) share of Australia's foodbowl we are humbled and privileged to protect our natural environments and respect our Government's attention to the triple bottom line of generational sustainability.

Council Concerns with the Guide to the MDBA Plan

Community feedback to the Guide to the Plan clearly suggests that our community appears to have lost faith in Government consultation on important basin environmental issues.

Obviously it will take time and considerable effort to rebuild our communities trust over time. Our community are advising that they are extremely wary given their traumatic experiences with both the New South Wales and Victorian State Governments during their consultation in relation to the establishment of the River Red Gum Forests.

Our community has suffered unbelievable upheaval over the last decade due to the prolonged drought, the introduction of water trading, fluctuation in commodity prices, unbundling of water from land, the imminent threat of locust plague and the (MDBA Plan) threat of losing their water to environmental flows. The Plan has unfortunately become public at a time that clearly places unnecessary, increased stress (and mental health concerns) on

our community members and families struggling to come to grips with the uncertainty surrounding their futures.



Pictured (above left to right): Inundation of land due to flood and epic Locust plague

Matters Requiring Attention

- Moira Shire Council contends that the methodology used to justify/determine the environmental water requirements is unclear/ambiguous and requires a comprehensive and clear justification.
- The Guide to the Plan fails to identify environmental infrastructure opportunities and innovative approaches that should be investigated, and implementation committed before reductions in water diversions are calculated.

Council Requests that MCBA Consider

- There is a critical need to highlight that the Plan addresses the triple bottom line
- The Plan must recognise (and therefore address) that the proposed SDL's will have a potentially devastating impact on the irrigated agricultural sector of Moira Shire

- Clearly, consideration of the MDBA basin environment must include consideration of the basin communities
- The MDBA must advocate strongly to the Commonwealth Government that the water buy back should be constrained until a targeted, strategic framework is established
- The maximisation of water related infrastructure improvements (on farm and off farm to maximise savings and minimise any loss of consumptive water)
- The Plan must provide an ongoing environment that creates and reinforces investor confidence in our businesses, families and communities

Councils Mayor, Councillor Ed Cox and Chief Executive Officer, Gary Arnold, would welcome the opportunity to talk to our submission on behalf of our stressed community.

Yours sincerely

Gary Arnold
Chief Executive Officer