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## The Senate Committee on the Management of the Murray Darling Basin

I wish to comment on the Murray Darling Basin Plan and the resulting responses and reactions since its launch in October 2010.

I am a farmer and business owner and I live in Murrumbidgee NSW in the MIA. I am currently the president of the Murrumbidgee Valley Food and Fibre Association. I am married to a third generation irrigation farmer and my father, Neil Donaldson, was the CEO of Ricegrowers Pty Ltd in the 70's and 80's. I have raised three children in this community and I have lived and worked here for most of my 53 years. For the last 31 years I have also been a secondary teacher and TAFE lecturer somewhere in the Riverina. I therefore have a personal stake in the outcome of this process.

As you have probably realised the overwhelming response from people who live and work in the Murray Darling Basin is very hostile. We are hostile for several good reasons. These are some of my reasons.

- 1) The Water Act 2007 has extremely limited "terms of reference" and therefore the current Murray Darling Basin Plan (MDBP) could only come up with one answer which is: Severe cuts to irrigation entitlements to flush down the river. There are technical and storage options which would create much better outcomes for the health of the river and for regional communities. This plan is way too limited because the terms of reference were way too limited.
- 2) The MDBP is only considering water shortages and drought. This is only half the story as recent events in the MDB has indicated. Wouldn't it be smarter to come up with a plan that protects us all from both sides of our variable and extreme climate? Floods are just as common and just as devastating as droughts. What is the plan for all this water if we move into a flood cycle or a wet cycle? The current plan is bordering on outright stupidity and profligate waste if it is applied to a wet cycle.
- 3) The MDBP is full of holes and inconsistencies and misinformation. The MDB is in fact over 1,000,000 square kilometres and many of the Ramsar listed sites are only there because of irrigation. They are certainly not in danger because of over extraction or overuse of water. Taking water from irrigation will potentially endanger some of these Ramsar sites. I also strongly object to the highly subjective approach the Water Act 2007 has taken to select key indicator sites. The way you have chosen them has more to do with dubious "International Conventions" than any real understanding of Australian conditions. Added to this is an alarmingly undeveloped Environmental Watering Plan. I can assure you that this EWP would not be passed by the regulatory bodies we must work with. No appreciation has been given to the fact that there are more wetlands fully maintained in the MDB now than before the introduction of water conservation and irrigation. This plan has completely failed to recognise one of the greatest destroyers of river health in the MDB: European Carp. It has also failed to recognise another evil in the system: evaporation. These are only a few of the inconsistencies; our organisation will submit a more detailed account in the near future.
- 4) Irrigation farmers have never had control over "allocations". Why are they being labelled as the scapegoats by your plan and also by the resulting political rhetoric? During the recent drought most irrigation water was not available and not allocated. How does buying up these entitlements improve anything when the water is not available in the first place?
- 5) "End of System Flows" seems to ultimately mean the Murray Mouth. There are far better solutions to improve the problems in SA rather than just "flushing the river" with storage water. If not for irrigation storage and water conservation techniques, the lower end of the Murray would

have completely dried up in the recent drought. Because of water storage and conservation, SA had enough critical water for 3YEARS(!!!) even in the worst part of the drought. How is the MDBP going to make this any better? In a drought cycle, there simply is not enough water to do what they claim they want to do, even if they took all irrigation entitlements. Wouldn't it be smarter to look at some good technical solutions for SA issues? We all need to recognise that SA is at the bottom of the system which is like being "at the bottom of the drain". The problems there will still exist even if you do "flush it" more often. There are definitely better plans to solve these issues, why are they not in this plan?

- 6) 800 jobs! You must be joking. Please check these models and statistics. It would be easy to accuse the MDBA of manipulating the figures if they stand by this particular set of statistics. Even someone with no statistical background could explain that removing 27% to 37% of the productive water from business enterprises in the MDB will result in a loss of far more than 800 jobs. Communities in the MIA as well as other purpose built areas are only in existence because of irrigation. The assumptions that all these people could somehow relocate and find alternative employment are totally unrealistic and downright insulting. Please check the figures and please check the reasons for allowing the publication of these figures in this plan.
- 7) The MDBA and politicians claim they can lessen the pain by buying back water from willing sellers. Once again this is an unrealistic assumption. You have failed to recognise the "flow on effect" to these purpose built communities. What do you think is going to happen to people who have no water to sell but will have to sell their houses and move elsewhere because too much productive water has been permanently removed from the area? Also, after 10 years of crippling drought, many of the sellers would be "desperate sellers" rather than "willing sellers".
- 8) One of the most insulting aspects of this plan is that it claims "wide consultation" and much "peer review". It is patently obvious that they did not consult or review very much with the people who know the practicalities of managing water and know the true condition and the true history of the MDB. These people live and work in the MDB. Some of these people are 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation producers and have vast practical experience and vast knowledge of the system. They know that there are many better ways to improve outcomes for the basin than this plan. This plan is purely and simply a "flush it plan". Why didn't anyone consult and review with people who have practical and generational knowledge? I would also add that the definition of "consultation" is not just touring around and giving a power point presentation and then taking questions which you refuse to answer or cleverly evade. The definition of "consultation" is: debate, discuss, request professional advice, refer for information and advice, seek advice, ruminate, put on one's possibility thinking cap, seek guidance, cogitate, conceptualise or deliberate. [\*Macquarie Dictaurus, Macquarie University 1991.\*](#) Please stop pretending you are consulting. Be honest and say that you are presenting and being polite enough to ask for questions.

In summary, this plan is widely unacceptable in the MDB because the terms of reference are too narrow and the conclusions are impractical, unrealistic and unbalanced.

I would strongly suggest you need to go back to the start and come up with wider terms of reference and consult with all stakeholders in the MDB and also be sensible enough to look at "whole of system" plans that would include practical and achievable technical solutions. Because your terms of reference were too narrow you have come up with an "end of system flush it plan" that does not recognise or even contemplate any other options at all.

My greatest fear is that I am witnessing a political manoeuvre reminiscent of the "Cultural Revolutions" in China. History has taught us that grand idealistic manoeuvres like this will only result in shameful waste, desperate hardships and a black mark forever in the history books. Please do not do this to our great country

and our great heritage. We probably need a “whole of system plan” but this is not it! You simply must start again with a better Act and a better framework.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Debbie Buller

**Kind regards,**

**Debbie Buller**

**President, Murrumbidgee Valley Food and Fibre Association Inc (MVFFA)**