Submission to the Productivity Commission

Mildura 12th October 2018

From

South West Water Users

South West Water Users (SWWU) represents water users on the Lower Darling River downstream of the Menindee Lakes water storage scheme and NSW licensed water users on the Murray River from the Murrumbidgee Junction to the South Australian Border.

Our members use water for domestic and livestock purposes as well as for irrigation of both permanent plantings and annual crops using both general and high security water entitlements.

On the Lower Darling downstream of Menindee and above the influence of the Wentworth Weir, there is the town of Pooncarie and about 70 families on 50 properties. They cover an area in the vicinity of 1 million ha. , have around 250,000 adult sheep plus lambs in season as well as extensive numbers of rangeland goats and native wildlife. Six properties irrigate extensive, high value permanent plantings. All are dependent on the Darling River for water.

On the Murray River downstream of the Murrumbidgee junction, there is extensive irrigation of permanent plantings. This extends into the Lower Darling River within the influence of the Wentworth weir pool.

Our submission will focus on The Lower Darling due to the extent of the dysfunction in the management of this river and the lack of interest to date in any improvement in this as part of The Basin Plan.

It is unfortunate that The Basin Plan makes these issues worse – not better.

Requirements under The Basin Plan for adverse supply reliability impacts to be 'offset or negated' are simply not happening.

Key Issues

- The Water Sharing Plan (WSP) / Water Resource Plan (WRP) process in The Darling system
- The approach to date on The Menindee Lakes Project as a supply measure
- The lack of any serious approach to managing water quality issues in The Darling system.
- Impacts of The Basin Plan on water reliability on The Lower Darling.

WSP and WRP Process with an emphasis in The Darling River System

- To date within NSW there is a categorical refusal to have any 'whole of river' approach to the WSP's along the Darling River system.
- The river has been divided into a series of 'sectionalised silos' which are not even allowed to talk to each other.
- There is no concept of 'connectivity' along the river.

- WSP's in upstream catchments are now being accredited without any concept of river connectivity included in them
- In a water use context, the lowest priority licences (supplementary, high flow) being used to grow annual crops (cotton) upstream are a higher priority than any commitment to get fresh water to the bottom of the river system.
- There is no attempt to manage water quality along the river system in spite of massive water quality problems in the bottom half of The Darling River
- To date the MDBA has shown no interest in rectifying this.
- As a consequence these deficiencies are likely to be carried over to the WRP.
- The Basin Plan lists these issues as 'A category' 'have regards to' – so in practise all of the above gets ignored. This is an appalling situation.

The Menindee Lakes Project

- The MLP is intended to produce 106 SDL offsets out of the 605 total.
- As such it is the largest physical project in the supply measure system.
- The project is based on a series of infrastructure upgrades and – more significantly – a revision of the operating rules.
- The SDL Offsets are generated by storing less water (effectively decommission Cawndilla) and using it quicker (rapid drawdown to an 80 Gl Lower Darling reserve).
- This is a direct threat to water supply reliability on The Lower Darling.
- Consultation with people currently reliant on Menindee to date is zero.
- The project specifically includes the need for an alternative supply for Broken Hill, the closure of irrigation at Tandou and the removal of permanent plantings downstream of Menindee.
- The project ignores impacts on the river, water use by people, towns and livestock as well as General Security irrigation.
- To date Broken Hill and Tandou (Websters) have been favourably accommodated.
- Everyone else has been ignored.

Water Quality in The Lower Darling

- This is specifically referred to in draft finding 8.2 and 9.2
- There is currently no commitment within NSW to manage water quality along the Lower Darling River. The 'Water Quality Management Plan' does not exist. Progress on 'Extreme Event Provisions' is negligible.
- These issues can only be addressed by managing the Darling River in a 'whole of river' context and to date there is a categorical refusal to do this in NSW.
- WSP's in upstream catchments are currently being accredited without any concept of water quality management along the whole river system.
- Water in the Lower Darling is frequently not fit for human use.
- There are multiple examples of serious skin infections being acquired by children who come into contact with water.
- The current medical direction to people with young children on The Lower Darling is to either truck in water for domestic use – or truck out the kids.

Impacts of the Basin Plan on Reliability from Menindee

- Over 90 % of the Lower Darling water use licences are now environmentally owned licences (TLM ex Anabranch Pipeline and CEWH ex Websters/Tandou)
- In both cases historical physical water use was from Lake Cawndilla which, in the dry years, was invariably disconnected storage – and noting that Cawndilla is the deepest and hence the most efficient lake at Menindee. These licences are now expected to be supplied from the top lakes – Wetherall and Pamamaroo.
- This is a 4 fold increase in the supply obligations from the top lakes in dry years – and it is the top lakes which are the reserve for the Lower Darling.
- Both of these licences now have no connection with the historical use characteristics of the 'source' water and are now a direct threat to supply reliability on The Lower Darling.
- The Basin Plan intends to draw water from Menindee far quicker than previous use. This is based on conversion of CEWH water recovered in other locations to a supply drawdown from Menindee.