

## **Comment on:**

### ***Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Five-year assessment – Productivity Commission Draft Report***

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My comments on the draft report are confined to discussion relating to management of non-salinity water quality issues, in particular the role of ‘water quality management plans’ (wqmp). This was the critical part of my initial submission to the Productivity Commission, and unfortunately the issues I raised at that time appear to have been over-looked in the draft report.

#### **Inadequacy of current approach to Water Quality Management Plans**

I re-emphasise the Terms of Reference of the Commission’s review, which in part state:

*The Commission should assess:*

*...the extent to which the current framework for implementing the Basin Plan, ... is likely to be sufficient: to support delivery of the objectives and outcomes identified in Chapter 5 of the Basin Plan,*

I endorse the Commission’s view that Water Quality Management Plan’s (wqmps) are ‘the main mechanism by which water quality will be managed...’ in the Basin Plan. This is particularly true of long-term issues; it is only short-term, chronic, water quality issues which are likely to be addressed by operational flow decisions.

Thus, the fundamental question for consideration by the Commission in this matter becomes, to what extent are wqmps sufficient to *...maintain appropriate water quality...for environmental, social, cultural and economic activity in the Basin and ...Basin water resources remain fit for purpose.*<sup>1</sup>

The only endorsed wqmp at the time of the Productivity Commission’s issues paper was part of the Warrego-Paroo-Nebine WRP. The approach by MDBA to implementation of water quality matters can be gauged by what MDBA considered an acceptable wqmp.

This accredited wqmp contains **no** real water quality management actions. The assumption clearly seems to be that a comprehensive analysis of risks and threats and setting of targets without any management action is sufficient to ensure Basin water resources remain fit for purpose. A wqmp without any real management actions is clearly insufficient to *maintain appropriate water quality* and should be so recognized by the Productivity Commission.

Despite their clear Terms of Reference, the Productivity Commission draft report does not reflect a robust and objective analysis of this issue.

#### **Consistency with national guidance material**

The Issues Paper made it clear that the Productivity Commission wished to explore in detail:

*any inconsistencies between the various national water quality guidelines and the water quality management plan requirements in WRPs and whether these inconsistencies are being resolved and managed*

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<sup>1</sup> From: ‘Objectives and outcomes in relation to water quality and salinity’: Basin Plan, Sn. 5.04

Australian Governments have a well-established, endorsed framework for managing water quality, - 'The National Water Quality Management Strategy'. One of the earliest documents prepared was the 'Implementation Guidelines' (1998) which, among other things, provide a clear approach to what is required for a water quality management plan. This was extended in the 'Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality' (2000). These guidelines have been recently clarified with the principles of what should constitute a water quality management plan (wqmp) clearly documented:

<http://www.waterquality.gov.au/anz-guidelines/framework/wqmp>

The wqmp, as adopted in the Warrego-Parroo-Nebine WRP, is clearly inconsistent with these nationally agreed guidelines at a number of levels; inconsistencies which were **not** identified in the draft Productivity Commission report, and subsequently no recommendations were made for them to be 'resolved and managed'.

I find it more than a little disturbing that the Productivity Commission would consider as adequate a wqmp which has targets but no logical implementation mechanisms and bears no resemblance to nationally endorsed national guideline material contrary to the principled approach indicated in the Issues Paper; it is the management actions in a wqmp that are *most critical to achieving the Plan's intended outcomes*.

As the primary author of the water quality section of the draft Basin Plan, I can attest the intent was for water quality management to be supported by comprehensive wqmps, in accordance with national guideline material produced under the National Water Quality Management Strategy, as required by the Water Act<sup>2</sup>. That is, a full range of management measures should be adopted in the wqmp; not necessarily restricted to those relying on flow-management. This approach had unequivocal legal endorsement.

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<sup>2</sup> Under Sn. 25 of the Cwlth *Water Act* (2007), the Authority and the Minister **must** have regard to the National Water Quality Management Strategy in developing water quality requirements of the Basin Plan.