

## SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

### Murray Darling Basin Plan: Five-year Assessment

I appreciate the opportunity to make this submission and for the opportunity to have attended the recent community consultation meeting in Wentworth. This Submission relates to your Terms of Reference Re ...*the current framework for implementing the Basin Plan*....

I would like to make some general comments relating to governance concerns in this subject.

I believe that Basin Plan performance is satisfactory in Southern Basin, where efficient metering, water trading and the 'cap' on further diversion are processes generally accepted.

In contrast is the Northern Basin, where sustainability of the Darling River and tributaries has been threatened by mismanagement.

**It would be appreciated if the Commission would investigate and report on any authority given to the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), to require any State to take remedial action, in the event of unsatisfactory performance of Basin Plan matters by that State.**

I believe this investigation is justified, in that MDBA has made references to having very limited authority over State matters. A range of water regulation changes were introduced by the NSW State Government immediately prior to commencement of Basin Plan. In my view, these changes bear little resemblance to sustainable river management and therefore little resemblance to objectives of the Basin Plan. The Interim Report by Ken Matthews AO 8/9/17 (Mathews Report) confirms widespread deficiencies in compliance and loss of community trust in processes in the Northern Basin.

New South Wales has refused to protect environmental flows from being diverted for irrigation over the period. This inaction is in stark contrast to the objectives and spirit of the Basin Plan (I note that a release of environmental water was approved on 13 April 18').

Even after this much time, I have not yet noticed where the MDBA has informed the community of the MDBA position in the Northern Basin matters raised by Four Corners and the Mathews Report. The views expressed by MDBA CEO at the Victorian Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee<sup>ii</sup> [Meeting record 5/12/17, page 54] are difficult to align with the enormity of the issues that have arisen in the Northern Basin.

It is also difficult to align the delay in responding to the matters raised in the Four Corners program, with the objectives of the Basin Plan, including community communication and transparency, given that the matters involved were key events. The Commission may consider it advisable to review any communication from MDBA relating to the Four Corners and the Mathews Report so as to gauge the MDBA attitude to these reports.

The community is entitled to be alarmed. In 2012, NSW introduced significant additional river management changes without sufficient information on water take and without sufficient consultation prior to these changes. MDBA has ultimately in March this year, released information on internal scientific investigations, that now confirms increases in water take upstream has reduced downstream flows, especially during low flow events.

The flow reductions had been obvious to the communities for many years. The MDBA must ensure that accurate water take information is routinely gathered as fundamental part of management, and that this information is available when water management plans are being compiled.

**The Commission should consider undertaking a review of the efficacy of the assumptions used by MDBA in arriving at their recent proposition to reduce the environmental water allocation by 70 GL in the Northern Basin in favour of increasing extractions by the same amount.**

Media reports have suggested that MDBA in November 2017, had received advice following an internal scientific investigation that supported the view that Darling River flows were already being adversely affected by increased upstream water take [Sydney Morning Herald 4 April 18]. It is difficult to understand how these processes and their outcomes are in accord with Basin Plan objectives for sustainable rivers.

The common denominator in meeting stakeholder needs in the Darling River and tributaries is increased flows along the total length of the respective streams. Whether the stakeholders are rural towns, indigenous communities, floodplain graziers, irrigators, stock and domestic users, tourism or an amenity for residents and tourists; they are all in need of increased whole river flows so as to achieve a sustainable river.

Similarly, the Darling River and tributaries contain valuable examples of fish recruitment and refuge areas that rank very highly compared with these categories across the MD Basin. Research has shown that Callop (Golden Perch), spawned in the Darling River, may make a significant contribution to lower River Murray populations. In years such as 2009-10, the Darling River may be the primary source of fish. Samples taken in the Lower Murray River of Callop year-classes that spawned in 2009-10, originated almost exclusively from the Darling River, whereas samples taken of Callop that spawned in 2010-11 were about 50-50 from the Darling and Lower Murray Rivers [Zampatti *et al.* 2015. Ye *et al.* 2017]<sup>iii iv</sup>.

Australia has a long standing strong market recognition for “clean and green” products. Export and domestic markets are increasingly demanding production in sustainable environmental conditions. Horticultural industries have invested heavily so as to be able to demonstrate and authenticate their “clean and green” credentials.

The events in the Northern Basin pose a threat to Australia’s export markets; not just to products from the Northern Basin. **I believe the MDBA needs to elevate recognition of this key marketing responsibility for our food and fibre producers and embed this strategy more assertively in the implementation of the Basin Plan.**

In many of the debates around river management, the environment is often portrayed as a disconnected stakeholder, to be treated as an optional extra. However, the reverse is the case. The needs of the environment are intertwined with the needs of other stakeholders. All stakeholders need sustainable rivers, right along the entire length of each river.

Achieving increased flows will need more than improvements in compliance – that’s the easy part.

A far more important need is to achieve sufficient ‘claw back’ in the extravagant water regulation concessions made in the Northern Basin in recent years.

Major threatening circumstances requires major rectification. Incremental efforts will not succeed.

Barrie MacMillan

19/4/18

## References

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- i <https://www.mdba.gov.au/media/mr/lower-darling-flows-water-quality-concerns>
- ii [https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/enrc/Environmental\\_Water/09\\_Murray-Darling\\_Basin\\_Authority.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/enrc/Environmental_Water/09_Murray-Darling_Basin_Authority.pdf)
- iii [http://www.pir.sa.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/248131/Golden\\_Perch\\_Murray\\_Darling\\_Basin\\_Report\\_-\\_FINAL\\_.pdf](http://www.pir.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/248131/Golden_Perch_Murray_Darling_Basin_Report_-_FINAL_.pdf)
- iv <http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/e50547b8-9554-4bf9-b232-f17451129e56/files/lower-murray-ltim-report-2015-16.pdf>