

A submission for the Productivity commission inquiry into the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

I am a fifth generation farmer to live on the Murrumbidgee river system, my ancestors came to Narrandera in the 1840's. I have spent some 30 odd years involved in various committees setup to advise the State government on River management.

It has always been an aim of people living on the river to have plans for its overall management. We were ever hopeful that the Murray Darling Basin Plan would deliver certainty for everyone living on the river both from an environmental and consumptive user point of view.

The plan has been developed by desktop environmental scientists, promulgated by bureaucrats and consummated by politicians with virtually no input from the community. I attended various pre plan community discussion meetings and almost all practical community discussion was either heavily discounted or ignored. This was always going to be a recipe for the plan to achieve very little, my neighbours and friends have lost interest in the process and are no longer engaged. Without them the plan is just a political football or a dog's breakfast.

The models used by scientist to determine flow variability (IQQM) were originally developed by the NSW department of water resources and funded by Murrumbidgee irrigators. After several years of development it was decided that the model was never going to be able to accurately predict the wide range of natural variability that occurs in the river system. The model was then accepted with the limitations in predictability approximately around 70 percent accuracy. A lot of its limitations were governed by data accuracy which hinged around early data being monthly time step and the mathematical gymnastics required to convert it to daily timestep. It appears now that this model has achieved a life of its own far beyond its original capabilities.

It is only now that the scientific world is starting to research fish stocks and other aquatic animals, prior to the plan very little was know about numbers of aquatic animals. Where are the bench marks that can give us some idea if the plan is actually working? Fishermen of 40 and 50 years experience tell me that very little has changed and they still have to use experience and luck to catch fish.

The environmental world has always had the theory that if you take water from consumptive use and give it back to the environment there will automatically be an improvement. This ignores the reality that water quality is the driver for aquatic life. It doesn't matter if the river is full or empty if the quality doesn't fit the parameters pf certain aquatic activity then it won't happen. I have noted locally that if a wetland fills up with local rainfall then bird breeding etc. happens almost immediately whereas water delivered by environmental flows has a much lower response. The importance of over bank flows is grossly overstated if they were important then the period of more than ten years prior to 2010 when there were no overbank flows there would have been an environmental catastrophe but the opposite was the case whereby european carp numbers fell and native fish numbers increased.

I find it extremely galling when the CEO of MDBA says that the plan needs time for it to work and that

we had a 100 years of degradation. Prior to the mid 1960's less than 20 percent of the river flows were being diverted. It must be understood that the population living on the Murrumbidgee system has almost doubled since 1950 and also advances in livestock management have probably doubled livestock numbers.

The plan has one positive feature and that is the on farm and system efficiency measures that have been put in place. They have to some extent ameliorated the impact of buy back on communities but I find it interesting that economic studies downplay the economic impacts of the plan without taking into consideration that nearly all commodity prices are at an all time high. Those of us that have been in rural industries realise that it is cyclical and that snap shot in time studies are useless.

The plan will work properly when an engagement process that people have confidence in is put in place. The present "use it or lose it" management of environmental water needs to change and that a community group should replace bureaucratic management of environmental water. Government agencies and scientists should only have an advisory and administrative role in river management. Environmental water needs to be managed in a way that after a flood the water becomes available to consumptive users and the money then used to buy water when it is required in dry times. No urban waste water should ever be returned to the river it all should be used on sporting facilities or parks and gardens.

Most of the confusion with the plan is about what the river is going to be like in twenty years time. No one wants it to go back to a series of smelly muddy water holes that it was for long periods of time prior to river regulation. Unless something happens about catchment management and European carp and the barrages in South Australia the river system will remain the same.

Regards

Rel Heckendorf

Top Reeds

Narrandera NSW. 2700