

Thursday, 19 April 2018

Jane Doolan
Commissioner
Productivity Commission
Level 12, 530 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000, Australia

Dear Jane

RE MURRAY DARLING BASIN AUTHORITY 5 YEAR REVIEW RESPONSE FROM STRATEGIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE OF LOWER MURRAY WATER

The Strategic Advisory Committee (SAC) of Lower Murray Water (LMW) represents rural customers within the Pumped Irrigation Districts of Merbein, Robinvale, Red Cliffs, Mildura, Millewa and also Private Diverters from Nyah to the SA Border, which range from small family farms through to large international corporate organisations.

The SAC are very supportive of the issues raised at the Mildura meeting on 28 March 2018, held by the Productivity Commission to inquire into the effectiveness of the implementation of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) Plan and Water Resource Plans as they affect Zone 7.

As a facilitator, you heard with compassion and understanding, the expressed threats to our region, which were articulated extremely well and supported by all those in attendance. Everyone had an opportunity to be heard. The united message, supported by argument and passion, outlined the trend of the recent past, which is outside the MDB Plan and not sustainable.

There was great concern expressed around the changed regulation of the Darling River, where the security of supply and the flow to the Lower Darling River has dramatically diminished supply in recent years.

The Darling River is no longer a tributary of the Murray River within the Murray Darling Basin. The MDB is not being managed in a holistic manner. It appears to us that the Darling is being managed independently by NSW, without recognition of its place as one major tributary of the Murray.

The Murray River cannot, does not, have the ability or water, to pick up the shortfall in contributions from the NSW Tributaries of the Darling and the Murrumbidgee Rivers, that are tending to be the norm in recent years.

All demands on the Murray River users - Urban, Environmental and Irrigators below the Barmah Choke are at extreme risk, without the Darling River contributing. This problem looks as though it will be compounded as is evidenced by the flurry of new development and proposed development on the lower Murrumbidgee.

This must be managed in a sustainable manner, rather than in a NSW centric manner, as is currently occurring where NSW strategy appears to allocate every last drop of water to the annual crops of Rice and Cotton when available, then contract or have a year out of production in years of lesser flows.

Permanent Plantings, High Security Licence, Drip Irrigation, Daily Supply!

The SAC Zone 7 Irrigators is extremely concerned that the risks to permanent plantings from the changing management within the Basin in recent years, did not get the exposure required or justified at the Mildura meeting. Hence we would like to further elaborate on our concerns.

Permanent Plantings are perennial crops e.g. Table Grapes, Wine Grapes and Dried Vine Fruit, Citrus, Almonds and Avocados. These crops are irrigated with the most sophisticated "expensive" efficiently pumped irrigation systems in the basin and are monitored with High-Tech surveillance systems. These Crops take several years to come into production, unlike annual, opportunity crops.

We estimate more than 95% of LMW Zone 7 Irrigators are irrigating Permanent Plantings with High Security Water Shares.

These perennial crops are now almost all irrigated with highly efficient Drip Irrigation and require daily access to irrigation water during the growing season of September to May, especially through the peak period leading up to harvest in December, January, February and March, which is critical. Lack of supply, for whatever reason, even for a day or so at critical times, can be catastrophic to production, quality and yield.

In the extreme, as was evidenced during the Millennium Drought, huge areas of Perennial Plantings using High Security Water, went out of production. Because of the cost and long lead time to come into production, the effects are still evident today. Annual crops such as Pasture, Cotton or Rice using Low Security Water, can drop out for a season and can bounce back as soon as water is available. Not so for permanent plantings, perennial crops.

All Perennial Crops also have a huge labour requirement year round, both on farm and in Regional Packaging & Processing Facilities. The flow on for regional services to support intensive irrigation communities is huge.

For many years, Victorian Permanent Plantings had a priority access to irrigation water as was set out in the Water Act. This security diminished over time, and now the only differential is through High or Low Security Water Shares.

The risk to Security of Supply for LMW Zone 7 Irrigators with permanent plantings, has increased dramatically in recent years.

- There is a lesser and diminishing contribution to the Murray River from the Darling and the Murrumbidgee Rivers.
- More recently and increasingly, is the threat of less contribution to the Murray with the extensive cotton crops coming further south.
- Thousands of hectares of NSW Western Lands Leases are now being converted to Freehold and are then being Irrigated from the Murrumbidgee. This further diminishes the security of water supply to Zone 7 High Security water users and downstream into South Australia, who are dependent on water supply from the Murray River.
- Zone 7 and South Australia, being below the Barmah Choke, have traditionally had access from a diverse range of sources as listed above. This is now threatened by the compounding effects of new irrigation developments and diminishing contributions from the northern tributaries of the Murray River within the Murray Darling Basin.

It can be readily argued that there are now two Management Plans. The Murray Darling Plan originally appeared fair and sustainable, whereas now, with the "Darling and

Murrumbidgee Plans", the whole Basin Plan is at risk. There needs to be one Murray Darling Basin Plan that is managed fairly for all Basin Communities, including Zone 7 Irrigators with High Security Water Shares irrigating Permanent Plantings.

Yours faithfully

The Committee Members of the LMW Strategic Advisory Committee.