

Our Ref: C12-3.4
Contact: NRF (Rex) Wilson
NRFW:JAB 1026



Office of the Mayor

Productivity Commission

18th April 2018

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Submission in Relation to Murray Darling Basin Review

Reference is made to the review being undertaken by the Productivity Commission into the Murray Darling Basin Plan and the outcome-based actions. On behalf of Warren Shire Council, I would like to advise that its representatives attended the Commission's briefing at Warren and that this letter relates to issues raised in this meeting and from general observations.

Warren Shire is one of the communities in the basin that has been impacted to a very high level from the water buy back and allocation of water for environmental outcomes. It has been estimated that approximately 11% of the local economy was impacted through the buy back process and that this caused both an economic and social reduction. Although Council understands the reasons this outcome did occur, it is important to reflect on the decisions of the past to identify the changes that must be made into the future.

The Macquarie River although recognised as part of the overall Murray Darling system is very similar to that of the Lachlan River system, where both Rivers end in a predominant swamp land or Marsh area, with only millennia type flooding escaping to the down stream riverine systems. For this reason, the allocation of water along the Macquarie is of direct benefit to the enclosed environment, the towns and villages along the river and to all forms of agriculture that derive benefit from the extractable water or from flood events.

The purchase of water as part of the greater buy back, although beneficial to the environment of the Macquarie River has almost zero impact on downstream environmental or social communities especially those in South Australia. Council supports environmental flows and recognises the importance of this water for the environment and cropping and grazing in the Macquarie Marsh area. However, the justification of water purchased from this catchment area for down stream users can not be substantiated. Further that as the Macquarie River is linked with the Bogan River and Castlereagh River systems that are predominantly unregulated dry river courses, the purchase of water entitlements therefore must come from the Macquarie River. This over estimation of buy back from two dry and one regulated system has resulted in the economic and social decline previously discussed.

115 Dubbo Street
P.O. Box 6
Warren NSW 2824

Telephone:
(02) 6847 6600

Fax:
(02) 6847 6633

Email:
council@warren.nsw.gov.au

Website:
www.warren.nsw.gov.au

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Although this is a historic outcome, the Commission's review is tasked to look at the benefits or impacts that the Basin Plan has achieved. From the discussions at Warren, it was evident that the outcomes of the basin plan are not adequately communicated across the community but also within the industry or support groups established by the State.

The review of the outcomes for the lower Macquarie River system and especially the Marsh area needs to be assessed and published to the community. The "Assessment of environmental water requirements for the proposed Basin Plan: Macquarie Marshes" MDBA Publication No: 28/12 provides a valuable guide as to establishing criteria for the protection of the Macquarie Marsh environmental communities. The outcome of this plan should be audited to ensure that the predicted water volumes required to reach the Marshes are being achieved in the months required and achieving the retention of ecological communities, fish habitat and fringe species.

It is recognised that a regulated system can achieve more annual flow than that of a natural water system. However, the recording of these flows requires the collection of more precise data from the installation of flow gauges prior to the Marshes and at the point of exit from the Marshes. In reviewing the *Commonwealth Environmental Water Portfolio Management Plan: Macquarie River Valley 2016–17*, it indicated that environmental and habitat targets may not be met during the 2015/16 period and into the 2018 year as the area becomes dryer. It is evident, reading the reports that at times induced flooding is required to repair habitats impacted by natural disasters such as fire or very dry periods. This has been a consideration of the Macquarie Cudgegong Environmental Flows Reference Group (EFRG).

Council concurs with this thinking on the basis that the whole of the water industry is advised of the needs. Similarly, that when Demands can be met by unregulated/ natural flows, or above delivery constraints and water is not required in the environment due to these seasonal rainfall events, that water is retained in the dams to release during periods of low availability when high flows are critical for habitat survival.

At the Warren meeting it was expressed that the timing of water releases to irrigators was an issue and that monitoring of flow along the river was difficult. The installation of additional flow gauges especially at the entry and exit to the Macquarie Marsh area will provide a higher level of certainty as to required environmental water reaching its targeted areas. Concern was also expressed that river monitoring should be undertaken between weirs to ensure that requested water releases are available as per the irrigators request and in similar circumstances to the rules around environmental releases.

It has been expressed to Council and at the Warren meeting that the water recovery that had occurred in the past was undertaken without scientific proof and that the water releases to reach the Marsh areas was not based on science or associated environmental need. Council is not in a position to comment on this aspect but would like to raise that any future water recovery or water reallocation is based on scientific need rather than political determination.

Council would like to request, that the Macquarie River catchment is reviewed and that a river specific plan is undertaken that does not link the Castlereagh or Bogan Rivers into the flow regime. It is important to understand that the Macquarie River is a closed system except in severe flooding events and that flows through to the Barwon River are very limited. Further that the environmental features and impacts on the

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river system should be separately addressed to understand issues of salinity, habitat protection and water needs and the requirements for all forms of agricultural activity along the catchment; especially the lower catchment areas. Council supports habitat protection to allow birds, insects and aquatic life to develop as it is a major attraction for tourism. However, the balance between environmental flows and all forms of agriculture needs to be catchment specific and the inclusion of the Bogan and Castlereagh Rivers confounds the Macquarie River outcomes.

At the Warren Meeting, the public expressed concern that the flow of information to all groups that represent industry or environment along the river are not provided with information to give a total view of what government agencies and others are undertaking. At a Council level we can only agree with these concerns as information should be reported at one site that encompasses the whole of the Macquarie River rather than across various agencies or government instrumentalities.

In reading the reports around the management of water and environmental outcomes for the Macquarie River, it is recognised that many aspects of this management are undertaken through the Murry Darling Basin Authority, State or Federal regulators. It is very difficult for an individual to identify if the targets are being reached or over or under estimated.

It is considered that a single annual report that draws together the information from all agencies should be produced. This will allow the total view of the Macquarie to be seen whether it be ground water, irrigated waters, annual storm events, environmental flows or habitat outcomes. This may help to improve education of the river system and allow everyone in the community to gain access to consistent reporting.

Although the Commission is focused on the whole of the basin plan and its achievements, River catchments that are autonomous such as the Macquarie and the Lachlan systems, may be able to be treated as single reporting entities and the total view of their uniqueness shown.

Council thanks you for this opportunity to make a comment on the review into the Basin Plan and especially the Macquarie River system.

Yours faithfully,

NRF (Rex) Wilson
Mayor