

The Forgotten River and its Forgotten People

Sandy MacKenzie

NLN Members Council

Board, Goulburn Broken CMA, 2011-2017

This is the title of my statement made at the Productivity Commission hearing into the effectiveness of the implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan in Shepparton last month. This hearing was dominated by some pretty desperate stories of the plight of dairy farmers in the Goulburn Valley – forced sales of water entitlements and farms because of the price of water and the consequent flow-on of closed shops, young people leaving town and family stress including breakdowns, depression and, in a few cases, suicide. I had significant support in the room when I explained that those on the Lower Darling had little concern about the price of water because there wasn't any water at all.

In the late 1980's widespread concern regarding the health and the low flows in the Darling River was one of the primary reasons for the Federal Government to establish the Murray Darling Basin Commission. The President, Rt Hon Ian Sinclair, said *"After 1987, the Darling began to receive from the MDBC the attention it deserved as one of Australia's major iconic rivers"*.

In 1991 a massive outbreak of blue-green algae occurred over 1000kms of the river due to low flows, high water temperature and runoff of fertilizers from the expansion of irrigated cotton and wheat farms in the upper reaches of the river. If one opens Google Earth's site for Tolarno Station, Menindee one can clearly see the green Darling River (year of image unknown).

It took until 2008 for the Commonwealth and the four states to agree to establish the independent MDBAuthority under the Water Act 2007 with bi-partisan support.

In 2016 the Lower Darling was dry for 8 months. Less than two weeks ago, The Land (29/3/18) featured a cricket match held on the bed of the Darling at Tilpa (between Wilcannia and Bourke) followed by a children's Easter egg hunt in the dry sand, to highlight the desperate plight of the river and the landholders relying on it.

The Australian has been the only major media source to highlight the state of the Darling even running a full page feature (7/3/2018) including a landholder, Rachel Strachan, at Pooncarie on the lower Darling between Menindee and Wentworth, who relies on it for her 14ha of table grapes that provides 50% of her income from her 32,000ha station.

So how have we progressed towards *"...the attention the Darling deserves"* commitment of 30 years ago. Rachel's words sum it up very well *"... The big guys up there are getting away with blue murder"*

And it is interesting to know who has made the following statements only last month ...

"..My own view is that some of these river height licenses are absurd;..

(referring to NSW licenses in the Northern Basin where irrigators can pump into huge on-farm storages, for mostly cotton, once the river reaches the required height and which are meant to be turned off once it drops below that height)

... but unfortunately I think it will be very difficult to have successful prosecutions on water theft unless it was deliberate meter tampering...

(where metering is installed)

.... the bottom line is that we must get to "no meter, no take..."

...you cannot have irrigators legally able to pump out environmental water that belongs to taxpayers...

Neil Andrew, Chair, Murray Darling Basin Authority –

As stated to National Rural Reporter, Sue Neales in The Australian 7/3/2018 p 13)

The McBride family of the historic Tolarno Station, who are our guest speakers at our dinner in Adelaide, have been for some years now, trying to get some recognition and action from policy makers. Their excellent website (tolarnostation.com.au) provides a valuable insight into the case they are making, especially on behalf of the 70 landholders on the Lower Darling below Menindee.

They are just as concerned with the environmental state of the river, its floodplain and its lakes as they are with having reliable stock and domestic water and irrigation water for those few that depend on it for their livelihood.