



AUSTRALIAN SENATE

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Response to the Productivity Commission

MDBP 5 Year Assessment Draft Report

The following observations are offered in response to the Productivity Commission Draft Report on the Five-year Assessment of the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

Management of the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth

South East Drainage Scheme

In the context of the Terms of Reference, in particular “to support delivery of the objectives and outcomes identified in Chapter 5 of the Basin Plan”, I note that there is very little discussion of the water quality of the Ramsar wetlands.

The management of these wetlands, encompassing the area of the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth (CLLMM), is largely under the control of the SA government, as is the South East Drainage Scheme.

However, the south-east of South Australia, while geographically within the catchment of the Basin, has been excluded from management within the Plan to avoid accountability for the loss of freshwater under the Plan.

Under the South East Drainage Scheme, large areas of the south-east are being drained to improve farmland with the water diverted away from the Coorong and channelled directly to the sea. This loss of fresh water to the Coorong is a major contributor to its deterioration.

The South East Flows Restoration Project, a partial mitigation of the environmental consequences of the South East Drainage Scheme, is expected to increase the flow of fresh water to the Coorong by 26GL. This is insufficient to offset the reduction in water quality in the Coorong arising from the diversion of natural freshwater flows.

This is occurring at the same time as upstream rural communities are forced to relinquish water with the objective of restoring water quality in the Coorong.

For as long as the Basin Plan objectives dictate that consideration must be given to the water quality of Ramsar wetlands within the Plan area, the continuing consequences of the South East Drainage Scheme cannot be conveniently ignored.

The Commission should make recommendations accordingly.

Barrages and Murray Mouth management

The five massive barrages which stretch for 7.6 km across the natural estuary openings to the Murray Mouth radically changed the natural environment of the Lower Lakes and impact of tidal flows on the lakes and Coorong.

Because of substantially reduced tidal scouring, Bird Island began to form in front of the Murray Mouth immediately after the completion of the barrages in 1940. Bird Island is a significant and growing threat to the objective of keeping the Murray Mouth open.

Despite the barrages being a primary driver of the environmental condition of the lakes, Coorong and Murray Mouth, there is almost no discussion of these effects in the Basin Plan or the Commission's draft assessment of the implementation of the Plan. Similarly, there is no mention of Bird Island in either the Commission's draft report or the Basin Plan.

A key rationale for greater flows down the Murray is to keep the Murray Mouth open nine years out of ten and to maintain sufficient flows over the barrages to preserve the quality of water in the Coorong. This is a fundamentally flawed aspiration and should be challenged. It is not possible to maintain water quality in the Coorong in this way.

During Spring 2016 there were major floods in the Murrumbidgee, Murray and Goulburn rivers which saw flows to SA of more than 60,000ML per day for over five weeks, peaking at 94,246ML on November 30. From November 30 until December 18, flows across the SA border exceeded 65,000ML per day. Major floods in Victorian catchments are required to produce flows of 90,000ML at the SA border, which is what occurred in 2016 and to a lesser extent in 2011.

However, on January 9, 2017, the SA government resumed dredging of the Murray Mouth. The five weeks of high flows had failed to clear sandbars at the Murray Mouth.

From this it is clear that planned flows at the SA border of 80,000ML, as per the Basin Plan, will not clear the Murray Mouth while the barrages remain in place.

Equally, reductions in water usage of either 2750 GL or 3200 GL will not keep the Murray Mouth open nine years out of ten while natural tidal action is prevented by the barrages. Either this objective should be abandoned, or the barrages permanently opened and a new lock constructed near Wellington to protect fresh water supplies to Adelaide and irrigators.

Without a detailed assessment of the effects of the barrages, the assessment of the Plan is incomplete. Quite simply, the environmental water quality objectives of the Plan and the outcomes of Schedule 5 of the Plan will not be achieved.

Constraints Management Strategy and recovery of an additional 450 GL of water

Unless it can be reasonably expected to deliver Schedule 5 enhanced environmental outcomes, additional water should not be recovered under the Plan. This needs to be made clear in the final report.

As it stands, water recovery plans are at odds with the ability of the Constraints Management Strategy to deliver that water in such a manner as to achieve most Schedule 5 outcomes. It is inconceivable

that the current Constraints Management Strategy (CMS) will achieve expectations, or that it would be largely operational by 2024.

It is also not plausible that all constraints can be removed within the funding available in the Water for the Environment Special Account. The Commission has already indicated that implementation of the strategy may exceed the current budget amount by about \$500 million. This corresponds with the long-held concerns of landholders, communities and local governments, commencing when the CMS was first released.

There are many uncertainties surrounding the efficient recovery of additional water and the ability to achieve the enhanced environmental outcomes in Schedule 5, as well as many unresolved issues with the implementation of the CMS.

Most of the Schedule 5 outcomes contained within the Basin Plan could not be achieved by securing the additional 450GL of water even if all of the CMS was implemented successfully.

The outcomes should be reviewed to determine whether they could ever be achieved and, if so, at what cost and environmental benefit.

I endorse the Commission's draft recommendation 5.3 for a cost-benefit analysis of pursuing the enhanced environmental outcomes in Schedule 5, and in particular the benefits and costs of other approaches to achieving those environmental outcomes.

The failure of the government or the MDBA to undertake cost-benefit analysis on many facets of the Basin Plan is not something that should be repeated.

Reporting, monitoring and evaluation

In my submission to the Commission's assessment of the Basin Plan, I outlined my concerns about the meagre monitoring of environmental outcomes as the Plan is implemented. The whole point of the Plan is to preserve environmental values in the basin, for which taxpayers are paying \$13 billion.

We must know that we are getting planned outcomes, and if not, why not.

My concerns over monitoring and evaluation of implementation of the Plan now includes areas other than the environment in light of apparent 'tick the box' monitoring and reporting uncovered by the Commission. I support draft recommendations 13.2 and 13.3.

Senator David Leyonhjelm