

Keith Harris

Natural Resources Commission
Executive Director
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13th September 2019

Dear Mr Wilde

Subject:- Submission on Water Sharing Plan Review

My Brief Background:-

I have been heavily involved in the Agricultural Industry for nearly 50 years and I am now semi-retired & currently living on a small holding located 10 kilometres from Tamworth. I am very concerned that further changes to the 'Water Sharing Plans' could have a devastating impact on the farming community and hence our rural townships.

Unfortunately competition for water and a number of very poor decisions; particularly the separation of water entitlements from Land Titles have already had a huge impact on upper catchments of our various river systems. Water entitlements have been sold down-stream to more profitable cropping enterprises & mining activities.

The loss of irrigation water in the Upper Catchments has had a huge impact on all farmers' ability to protect them from drought. The Tamworth / Gunnedah area 20 years ago supported large areas of irrigated Lucerne & Forage Crops; which could not compete with irrigated returns from crops like Cotton. Many irrigators were forced into Cotton following previous cut backs in water entitlements; due to the fact that Cotton used less water per hectare compared to alternative summer crops such as Lucerne, Maize & Soybeans, etc.

We are currently experiencing the worst drought on record over the whole of NSW; and the ability of farmers to manage this disastrous situation has been intensified by huge increases in water demand from growing rural towns, the delivery better environmental outcomes & the expansion mining industry.

Most farmers would consider themselves advocates for the environment and successful farmers are definitely in the best position to deliver the best environmental outcomes. I should also note that I was Chairman of a local Landcare / Rivercare Group for 7 years.

Water Sharing Plan Issues:-

1) Has the 'Plan' contributed to social outcomes?

Limited benefits have been achieved to date; possibly because well below average rainfall & recent severe drought. No doubt all residents of our local communities are looking for improvements in security of water, maintaining better river flows, maximising storage dam capacities whilst still delivering water to all users. We need to minimise losses & reduce evaporation. We need to eliminate 'Carp' & help protect our native fish populations.

We need to limit expansion in demand for water until there is a Capital injection to create more water. More dams or increase capacity of existing dams. Minimise system losses & look at the feasibility to bring water from higher rainfall areas.

Water Sharing Plan Issues

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2) **Has the ‘Plan’ contributed to better environmental outcomes?**

Very difficult to say; has it helped fish populations survive the drought? No!

Has it improved the quality of river water? No!

Has it reduced stream bank erosion? No!

Has the environmental benefits been effectively communicated & fully understood by the general public & other water users? No!

3) **Has the ‘Plan’ contributed to economic outcomes?**

Unfortunately this would have to be a definite long-term No!

The agricultural community has worn substantial losses in access to water and their ability to manage drought has been greatly curtailed. The majority of local business houses; which rely very heavily on farmers / agriculture are now struggling or they have already gone out of business.

Farmers are surviving on increased farm debt & many will go to the wall. The Local Tamworth Council is supporting expansion in houses, etc and they appear to be forgetting the Agricultural industry which built the town over the last 200 years.

Council continues to seek a bigger share of the limited water resources, to service this growing population & Government is supportive of rural expansion away from Capital cities, without consideration of the impacts on existing & rural communities.

Mining is also having a major impact on local rural communities; it is no doubt buying up necessary water reserves from farmers; thus reducing the pool of water which in the past would have been used to grow feed grain, hay, silage, etc.

It’s no wonder that our farming communities are facing big problems and they need to buy in drought reserves from all over Australia at exorbitant prices. Unfortunately this practice is leading to other problems such as ‘Biosecurity Issues;’ with new weeds being introduced onto local farms.

4) **Has the ‘Plan’ contributed to meeting its objectives?**

I suppose we would need to look at what were its original objectives?

If it was aimed at ensuring sustainability of the limited water resources; **Maybe yes!**

If it was aimed at better sharing of the limited water resources; **Maybe yes!**

If it was aimed at improving water quality; **No!**

If it was aimed at destroying our agricultural industry; **Maybe yes!**

5) **What changes are needed in the ‘Plan’ to improve outcomes?**

Unfortunately the damage has already been done and the Agricultural sector has lost faith in Government in delivering reasonable outcomes.

a) The Government / Commission needs to re-engage with the farming community to regain confidence that they are willing to act in the best interests of all water users

b) The Commission needs to review the sustainability levels of particularly the groundwater bores and provide irrigators with accurate updated recordings for as many bores as possibly; particularly during the worst drought on record.

- c) A feasibility study needs to address 'Evaporation & Delivery System' options.
- i) Reduce evaporation losses, from dams, lakes, on farm storages, etc.
 - ii) Review in stream losses from seepage into nearby aquifers; maybe pipe water flow in high loss zones.
 - iii) Maybe utilise the rivers to store water at greater depths; by constructing additional weirs.
 - iv) Additional in stream weirs could also speed up delivery times and improve social benefits.
 - v) Relax rules around delivery of environmental flow activities. Numerous farmers were very upset with environmental flow release in late June 2019 which provided limited benefit due the fact that the rules stated that the flow had to be used by the 30th June or it was lost.

**d) The Government / Commission needs to seriously look at ways of creating more water for the Murray Darling Basin (MDB).
The MDB generates 40% of Australia's total agricultural outputs.**

A Commission needs to recommend that several feasibility studies on creating additional water for the MDB need to be completed as soon as possible. Other countries are already channelling and developing systems of transferring water 1,000's of kilometres to:-

- i) Secure & safeguard their agricultural industries.
- ii) Improve environment benefits.
- iii) Looking at addressing potential 'Climate Change' impacts.
- iv) Enhance their social opportunities, including further development of tourism activities.

Thank you for providing community members with the opportunity to express our concerns in regards to potential changes to the water sharing plans. Obviously I am passionate about the future of Agriculture and the need to ensure that our water resources are protected in a sustainable manner.

I would also like to see all remaining water entitlements reinstated as part of the land titles to ensure that no further allocation is lost to existing communities. Unfortunately Agricultural has been at the bottom end of the water supply chain priority list far too long and this needs to change as soon as possible. It should be remembered that Agriculture will be around well after mining opportunities have been exhausted.

Kind regards

Keith Harris