SUBMISSION TO NATURAL RESOURCE COMMISSION INTO DRAFT BARWON-DARLING WATER SHARING PLAN REVIEW

Abstract

“With only so much water to go round, something has to give and it can no longer be the Murray-Darling Basin. The irrigators took a gamble and pushed the system to its limits. The remaining water can be distributed among fewer irrigators with more water apiece, or more irrigators, whose supply will be only half as reliable as before. In the end, much of the mismanagement of the Murray-Darling comes down the authorities’ ignorance of how the river systems functioned and the irrigators’ greed. The authors of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, like the authorities they represent, had not foreseen the ‘higher than expected level of risk that irrigators are willing to take’, especially with ‘high value, high water-use crops like cotton’.”

“Put more bluntly, because cotton is so lucrative, no matter how much water they have, most cotton-growers appear to eternally covet more.”

Quotes based from McHugh (1996) “Cottoning On” ¹

Jack Davies

Introduction

Gratitude should be granted to the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) and more specifically, to the authors and support team of the Draft Water Sharing Plan Review. The Barwon-Darling system in question is a vital contributor to supply water for the basin states in the Murray-Darling Basin. The Barwon-Darling is 1,600kms long and serves many communities that rely on the river system for their source of water. Any claim of misconduct, negligence and mismanagement within the system should be taken seriously and be investigated thoroughly and appropriate institutions take decisive, responsive action. The review done by the NRC has gone into great depth of the situation in the Barwon-Darling. We appreciate the time that the commission has taken in order to investigate, write and draft this report and are looking forward to when the final report is released.

However, for many communities and stakeholders along the Barwon-Darling system, many of the issues have already been identified from either different enquires, or is already general knowledge in the community. This report when finalised, will be the eighth government enquiry into the Murray-Darling Basin that has been published since 2017. This not the fault of the commission, but more of the government’s inadequate response to the major issues stated in these enquires. While the report identifies government bodies as a contributor to the Murray-Darling situation, it is only government intervention that will solve the crisis that the system is currently facing.

The 2012 Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan

The Barwon-Darling is an unregulated rain event fed river system flowing from Queensland in the North to Victoria and South Australia in the South. To quote the words from NRC’s draft review, “The Barwon-Darling is an ecosystem in crisis” 2. The Barwon-Darling is suffering from over extraction to the extent that it is no longer able to support sustainable agriculture and support the towns and communities and the river environment itself.

The 2012 Barwon-Darling water sharing plan is unlawful and breaches both state and federal water acts as it has put extractions for irrigation ahead of town water supply, stock and domestic, aboriginal communities and the environment. The previous plan was cleared after the consultation period had ended. The state government was lobbied from a group of irrigators that allowed a series of extraction rule changes that would only benefit irrigators above Bourke.

Changes were made to A Class licences that turned them into robust B Class. Allowing A Class water to be extracted with B Class pumps, under A Class pumping rules. A Class water could be pumped into storage and up to 300% could be pumped in any one year. Water modelling is not accurate as figures are taken on mean flows from the last century. Floods that occurred during this time skewed the average. The NSW government increased the Cap limit that soon created a way for irrigators to have unlimited water allocations through carryover.

High tax-payer costing grants made for on-farm water saving projects have been paid to some northern irrigators to only be misused to increase the capacity of water storages and build

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unauthorised earth works, that capture water before it even enters the rivers. Socio-economics at the northern part of the Barwon-Darling have had priority at the downfall of socio-economics down to southern areas of the Barwon-Darling and Murray River. Southern farmers on the NSW side of the Murray River now have zero allocation because the zero flow from the Darling to supply 40% of the Murray Rivers needs to farms on the lower end. Prior to the 2012 plan southern irrigators had the highest general security for water in the entire Basin. Now they have none.

This clearly indicates how the 2012 Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan prioritised irrigation at the top end above all stakeholders else below. Northern irrigators have allowed take the low to medium flows which were kept the Darling and the communities along it sustainable.

**Broken Hill Water Supply Business Case**

Recently, the NSW government reluctantly released the Broken Hill Water Supply Business Case, which describes the justification for the installation of the 270km water pipeline from Wentworth to secure Broken Hill’s water supply. Since the pipeline was announced in 2016, much of the Broken Hill public had already suspected that the pipeline was for the justification for irrigators above Bourke to extract more water from the Barwon-Darling. During this time, the community demanded for the NSW government to release the business case to the public, in order to validate their reasoning for the $500 million pipeline. The government has only now relinquished after intense scrutiny.

Even though the business case confirmed what people in the community suspected, what was a surprise was the fact that the business case so clearly stated that the pipeline would create benefits for irrigators up-stream more access to water supply. It has also been revealed that the pipeline was approved in 2012 before public consultation was sought for, and before Broken Hill had water shortage problems. No matter what the public opinion of the proposal, the pipeline was going ahead regardless. It has also been revealed that the government had also manipulated water storages in the Menindee lakes in order to better fit their narrative. They often drained the Menindee lakes to create a water shortage for Broken Hill and justify their pipeline. The drainage of the Menindee lakes created excess water in the Murray, often flooding in downstream areas.

All of these arrangements made by NSW government and the Murray-Darling Basin Authority were made to vindicate less flows in the Darling River and also reduce the amount of water needed to be stored in the Menindee Lakes. This would benefit upstream irrigators, as they could be entitled to more water extractions. The Business Case describes Northern irrigators are “Economic contributors to the state – agriculture sector”³. The Business Case also states this as a benefit through-out the document quoting, “Avoided water embargos on Northern Rivers irrigators for the purposes of supplying Broken Hill’s existing source”³ and “Minimise impact of Government intervention in supplementary water access allocations in the Northern Basin”³. The Business Case even points out southern irrigators concern of “Low levels of water flowing from the Darling River and Darling Anabranch”³ and “How a proposed long-term solution will impact their business operation…”³ While that examination of the business case for the pipeline may not be in the scope of the NRC Water Sharing Plan review, it does show how far the government and its departments are willing to go to have their narrative play out. The document shows a clear picture as what the government had intended from the beginning.

³ Department of Primary Industries. (2016, 31 March), Final Business Case: Broken Hill Long-Term Water Supply Solution. Retrieved from https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1DvuX3-7S5N5rTeY2_p6_hLm73KplMjo