

**Submission  
No 31**

**SUPPORT FOR DROUGHT AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN NEW SOUTH  
WALES**

**Organisation:** Water for Rivers

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# Water for Rivers

## Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Support for Drought Affected Communities in NSW

Water for Rivers is a grass-roots group based in New South Wales. Water for Rivers is inclusive, non-partisan, active, democratic, political and determined.

We are campaigning in support of rural and river communities to revive the Murray Darling Basin, the Darling River system and bring life back to the rivers. We are organising political and cultural activities to take back Water for the Rivers.

Water for the Rivers helped with the Yaama Ngunna Baaka Corroborree Festival in September- October 2019, with over 300 people from NSW, Victoria, South Australia, visiting Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke, Wilcannia and Menindee to give solidarity to these forgotten river communities.

Communities along the river system are being placed on undrinkable bore water, after rivers have been bled dry. Yet large cotton farms in the north-west and nut orchards in the south are green and lush. State governments and the Murray Darling Basin Authority Plan are destroying the rivers: giving water to big corporate cotton and orchard farmers, miners, and corporate water speculators who own no farmland, whilst communities, the fish, in particular the long-lived Murray Cod, and the ecological life of the rivers are suffering. Crucial fish and migratory bird wetland habitats that Australia is committed to protect under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance are being destroyed.

For the traditional owners of the flat lands of far west NSW the river is life. But distant governments have turned that life into a tradeable commodity sold to the highest bidder. Their river is now hoarded in private dams by water barons who ruthlessly manipulate the market to squeeze out every last drop of profit.

Seventy percent of water allocations in the Murray-Darling basin are owned by two Australian corporations, [REDACTED]

Lately mines are winning the bidding war. As temporary water prices skyrocketed to \$1,000/mg at the end of October, far out of the reach of food producers, Australia's largest olive grower Rob McGavin met with federal politicians, calling for a temporary ban on water trading by businesses that don't use water to grow produce, saying urgent Government intervention was required in the water market.

"Dairy farmers can probably pay \$200/mg before they're losing money and the best horticulture crops are around \$650/mg ... there's a huge amount of despair and anxiety," he said. As the farmers go bust, so do the communities that depend on them.

As the rivers die, rural communities become dependent on artesian water, but that too is being bought up by corporations like [REDACTED]. In the dairy district of Numurkah, near Shepparton, The Weekly Times reported that "farmers are going broke and the town is dying because poor water management and government policy has allowed water to be sucked up by corporate nut farms and traded like stocks."

"More than 110 dairy farmers in the district have stopped milking in the past year and 12,000 cows have been culled in the last two months alone" said Chair of Northern Victoria Irrigation Communities (NVIC) Dudley Bryant.

With much of the country in the grip of a devastating drought, this predatory squeeze on water prices has reached a crisis point with farmers and agricultural lobby groups pressuring the Federal Government for action.

But while the plight of our drought-stricken farmers gets the undivided attention of Canberra, the Aboriginal people of the river have been all but forgotten. And without the lifeblood of the river, they stand to lose everything that is sacred and precious to them. Already, life is vanishing - turning to dust. Their traditional foods; golden perch, cod, freshwater mussels, yabbies, turtles, birds, their medicinal plants, the ancient river gums, the nadoo plants from which they made their flour. Even the emus and kangaroos are dying of thirst.

Clans from all over would congregate on the river-bank to hold corroborees and feast on mussels and Murray Cod, corralled and caught in ancient rock fish traps, the oldest man-made structures on earth. But today the river runs dry. And all that survives of that maze of fish traps are remnants. Much of what existed at the time of European settlement was destroyed to allow river boats to travel upstream – impossible now given the disastrous state of the Darling River.

In the townships grimly hanging on along the Baaka/Darling and Barwon Rivers the scale of this catastrophe is immediately evident. The rivers have been turned into a soup of fertiliser, runoff and pesticides. Their skin itches if they wash in the water, the children get sores and stomach sickness if they swim. The water that comes from the taps is too putrid to stomach. It's supplemented with untested bore water full of salt and minerals.

The people of the Baaka have been living with declining water supply and water quality for a decade. With the steady collapse of the river local water authorities and government agencies seem to have given up on water supplies for these communities. That enduring headache has been left to charities and volunteers who truck water in for the townspeople to drink. Wilcannia is among the hardest hit. Bone dry and

shrinking fast, it was once a town of over one thousand. Now there's only about 600 people left.

What has happened to the river impacts the mental health of the whole community. "Everybody is angry" says Collin King of Wilcannia, "You kill the river - you kill everything. "The water in the taps is undrinkable. Families here rely on water deliveries from charities. Every fortnight trucks delivery our water in 10 litre boxes. Up to ten boxes for a fortnight. But we've also got the problem of not enough housing and there's overcrowding. Once the summer hits temperatures are over 42 degrees and the blue-green algae makes it unsafe to go near the water. It's unbearable."

Some communities don't receive the charity water and are forced to buy water from towns hundreds of kilometres away. One mother in Brewarrina who is surviving on an unemployment benefit below the poverty line said she is forced to spend \$100 a fortnight for water. By the time she's paid rent she does not have enough left over to buy food for her three children. "I have to feed them on bread and chips. I know it's not good for them but it's all I can afford."

The Murray Darling Basin Plan stipulates that it must take into account the views of Aboriginal people with respect to cultural flows and the Aboriginal objectives and outcomes. Traditional Owners in the basin consider water for the environment to be crucially important to their current and future social, environmental, spiritual, economic and cultural wellbeing (MDBA, 2016, p.292).

Barwon-Darling Watercourse Water Resource Plan 2012 conducted extensive surveys in the northern Basin establishing "direct, causal relationships between the availability of environmental water and Aboriginal socio-cultural life". The survey results showed that Aboriginal peoples valued very strongly environmental water. On this basis the Plan undertook to implement cultural flows and retention to protect Aboriginal values and uses.

The Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated Water Source 2012 provides for native title rights. This retains the level of protection of Aboriginal people's values and uses of the water resources in the Plan area that was in place under State water management arrangements that existed before this Plan. It also provides for the granting of Aboriginal cultural access licences.

"Cultural Flows" are water entitlements that are legally and beneficially owned by the Nations of a sufficient and adequate quantity and quality to improve the spiritual, cultural, natural, environmental, social and economic conditions of those Nations. These are our inherent rights." This was endorsed by Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) and Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) -The Echuca Declaration, September 2010.

**First Nations people, the custodians of the rivers for 80,000 years, need to be in all aspects of revitalizing our rivers. Water for Rivers calls for First Nations rights to water. River communities need DECIDING POWER over keeping rivers alive. This MUST include FIRST NATIONS communities who have been traditional guardians over river health.**

**We urge the Government to comply with the protections of Aboriginal values and uses as specified in Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated Water Source.**

**The 2012 Barwon Darling Water Sharing Plan also reversed original rules that had been put in place to halt the decline of the river and halt the growth in extractions. An Australia Institute analysis of the Barwon-Darling shows that flows are declining and concludes the changes to the water-sharing plan are definitely a contributing factor. The original rules were based on science and extensive consultation. The changes in the water sharing plan were made without new science and no consultation.**

**We demand that the rules in place immediately before the 2012 Barwon-Darling Water Sharing plan be reinstated.**

- \* Reinstatement of pump restrictions on A Class water shares (or an equivalent Individual Daily Extraction Limit);**
- \* Remove the 300% take of allocation in every year;**
- \* Remove unlimited carryover;**
- \* An independent review of the Cap model and cumulative Cap credits;**
- \* Reinstatement of the Cap Management Strategy.**

**We demand governments:**

- \* LEAVE WATER in the RIVERS. STOP the corporate megapumps.**
- \* BAN WATER SPECULATION and TRADING.**
- \* Jail water thieves and strip their water licenses.**
- \* BAN floodplain harvesting.**
- \* Instead of MORE dams, we need AN END to irrigation pumping during low-to-medium flow.**
- \* We need to give farmers incentives to grow crops better suited to arid climates.**
- \* We need water at a FAIR price to RIVER COMMUNITIES and SUSTAINABLE regenerative farmers.**

**Water for Rivers is calling for more water quality testing and on-going monitoring. The communities of the Baaka (Darling-Barwon Rivers) need safe water to drink and wash in. All homes and water sources for consumption, washing and water for living must be made safe. Water for Rivers have numerous anecdotal reports about skin rashes and other health issues associated with visiting the Baaka Region. One person became ill on the return journey from the Yaama Nganna Baaka Corroboree Festival and others developed gastric and respiratory symptoms on their return to Sydney. We believe that there are health impacts resulting from poor quality water and shortages. Health checks and support should be made available to First Nations people living under water stress.**

**Water testing and monitoring and water filtration systems need to be maintained. Give CLEAN WATER, TANKS and FILTRATION SYSTEMS to all stakeholders and households in river communities and fund tertiary water recycling. Portable reverse osmosis plants need to be supplied to take back illegally-accessed water from farm storages, filter it and return it to the river**

**It is vital that when it does rain again, not all the water is captured by empty storages. For the survival of the riparian systems - water holes, fish refuges, wetlands and the river must be replenished.**

**We oppose the government plans to license floodplain water harvesting, which would set in place even more extractions without investigating downstream impacts**

**There have been 39 reviews of the Murray Darling Basin Plan management, implementation and enforcement including the South Australian Royal Commission and another three currently underway. Each of these reviews have highlighted key failures of political rather than science-based decision making and called for reforms of transparency, monitoring and enforcement of the Plan.**

**Water for Rivers calls on State Government to audit and accredit all Water Sharing Plans and implement highest standards of transparency, monitoring and enforcement. We call on the government to**

**\* PROSECUTE corporations whose operations pollute rivers, catchments or artesian basins, and financial institutions that fund the corporate polluting activities. Politicians who corruptly enable corporate anti-environmental activities must be exposed and prosecuted and forced to resign. Hold politicians, senior civil servants and corporate managements LEGALLY ACCOUNTABLE for their decision.**

**\* Establish a FEDERAL INDEPENDENT COMMISSION AGAINST CORRUPTION**

**\* Charge FULL REMEDIATION COSTS for total damage, past and present, from mining by levies on the mining industry. No free water for mining.**

**Water for Rivers demand a stop to the corporate pumps sucking the life out of the river. We demand that the years of neglect & mismanagement be put before a Royal Commission. We want those responsible for the theft and wastage of water punished and want stolen water filtered and returned to the rivers. We support the call for a full Royal Commission of Inquiry into the management of the MDB Plan.**

**The federal government's Drought Response, Resilience and Preparedness Plan, released in November 2019, acknowledges water is crucial to drought resilience and concedes that Australia's finite water resources are under increasing pressure.**

**Its solution is to offer \$50 million for an On-farm Emergency Water Infrastructure Rebate Scheme to improve on-farm water management and \$36.9 million over five years "to improve water security and drought resilience in the Great Artesian Basin through increasing artesian pressure and reducing wastage".**

**It also proposes a national water infrastructure plan, connecting water sources through pipes, pumps and natural systems "to increase water supply and build resilience". About \$3.5 billion will be made available for infrastructure that will take still more water out of river systems.**

**But the plan places no limits on corporate accumulation of water supply and makes no attempt to halt the overallocation of river waters or buying up of artesian waters. The plan contains no funds for research into how artesian basins work and how much can be taken out of them before they depressurise and drop below sustainable levels.**

**Instead, the plan treats water as an infinite resource for corporate profiteering.**

**The same applies to soil and forests. The plan concedes that natural resources remain under pressure from climate change and considers the increased frequency and severity of drought in some regions as the most serious threat to land management.**

**It also admits that natural resources degrade during drought, when they are particularly vulnerable, and will likely have less time to recover before the next significant dry period, which will reduce future productivity.**

**But it persists in allowing the overallocation of artesian water and of river waters to produce irrigated crops and orchards, along with the industrial logging of rain-making forests in the Great Dividing Range and New England tablelands.**

**While it commits to implementing the federal, state and territory governments'-agreed national strategy and action plan for a stocktake of "land, soil, water, ecosystems**

and other natural resource assets that contribute to agricultural productivity and drought resilience”, there is no funding when it comes to any kind of coordinated national action.

There are no moves to restore funding to National Park rangers or the CSIRO. Similarly, there are no moves to reverse government cut-backs and privatisations in natural resources and primary industries departments, which used to provide free expert advice to farmers and land managers to help manage land sustainably and increase drought resilience through regenerative practices.

What is needed now is an entirely different plan to deal with the drought.

Such a plan would ensure water speculation is prohibited, particularly by companies that do not own land and have no connection to farming, as this practice is pricing food producers out of business.

Available water must be shared out at a set fair price to keep rivers, river communities and sustainable farmers alive. Farmers who cannot get their normal water allocations because there just is not enough water must be fairly compensated rather than given over-allocation amounts in following years.

Farmers need to be helped to ensure they can survive and operate sustainably. Throwing money at grant and charity schemes that time-poor rural people cannot access, one-off lump sum payments at Ministerial whim, or additional loans for farmers already crippled by debt are all stop-gap fixes that do nothing to stop the corporate takeover of land and water.

The National Farmers Federation have called for nationally consistent drought policy, with a permanent plan agreed by states, territories and local government.

Industry organisation Agforce have repeatedly called for drought resilience funding not tied to drought declarations, but rather open to farmers who complete skills training in building drought resilience with suitable tree and grasses plantings, erosion control, and contours and water catchment design, before droughts hit.

. Most Australian farmers are graziers, using livestock to manage fire risks on the nearly 47% of Australia that is marginal land and to produce food on land with irregular rainfall and poor soil. Currently there is no assistance to move stock away, only to bring them back, and with long-term severe drought in both NSW and QLD, sustainable long-term agistment can be halfway across the country in Victoria, the Northern Territory or South Australia.

As climate disasters push us to the edge of environmental and social decay, governments must be forced to switch their priorities from boosting corporate profits to protecting farmers and natural resources, most crucially water.



