

**Submission  
No 53**

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

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## PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO SUPPORT FOR DROUGHT AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN NSW

A few members of Sydney's northern beaches Greens community joined the Yaama Ngunna Baaka Corroboree Festival earlier this year and we travelled to towns along the Barwon/Darling River - Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke, Wilcannia and Menindee to assess the situation of the river, the communities and ecosystems. We are also part of a group called Water for Rivers, that provided opportunities in each town we visited to engage in meetings and discussions, where we heard first-hand accounts from a range of local indigenous people, farmers, businesses and townspeople. The intention was not just to gain awareness of the ecological impacts, the real circumstances, but to also investigate ways that we could help support drought affected communities along the river and bring about necessary changes to water management for future survival.

### POPULATION LOSS, LOSS OF TRADES, SKILLS, BUSINESS AND SERVICES

The demographic most likely to remain in many of these isolated regional areas, despite all the hardships thrown at them, are the resident indigenous communities, particularly those nations with land title. Strong ties to the land, a commitment that goes beyond economic considerations, was very clearly observed. The intrinsic love of country and the flora and fauna was expressed through songs and dance at the corroborees held each evening on this trip.

Deep knowledge of country, the weather patterns, the changes to plant growing seasons, river management, cultural practices, availability of bush tucker and understanding of animal behaviours are such a valuable resource for communities needing to observe and evaluate environmental change over time.

The exceedingly poor condition of the rivers, under these 'drought' conditions, is considered by many experts to have been exacerbated by inappropriate water management practices. In fact, state government changes to the Murray Darling Basin Plan in 2012 are actually destroying the rivers and driving people away from struggling towns. Water is being drained from the rivers by corporate interests and traded on the stock market. According to research conducted by The Australia Institute in a recent report called Dam Shame, huge amounts of unaccounted water is being hoarded in private dams, paid for by taxpayers. In fact, just 2 of these private dams cost the public nearly \$30 million. Apparently, according to data provided to the Senate, 20 – 30 large dams have been constructed in recent years, on private land for the benefit of large corporate agribusiness like Webster Ltd.

These dams increase water evaporation and irrigation water use – so they do not help drought-stricken towns, struggling small irrigators, natural ecosystems or the wider public. Private dams are not subject to any public consultation process with other stakeholders, who would be critical of the environmental and economic merits of such projects. Their 'environment assessments' are commissioned from private consultants by the dam proponents themselves. According to this report "there is no public information on how many there are, how much water they hold or how much they cost the taxpayer, despite Senate requests for this information."

Yet here we are, submitting recommendations as to how financial burdens can be addressed by those very communities, so terribly impacted by this enormous extraction of unaccounted water from the rivers. That we taxpayers are subsidising! Surely there needs to be an accurate 'independent' audit conducted of the volumes of water being extracted.

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.

## BUSINESS, DEBT FINANCE AND RESPONSES OF FINANCIAL COMPANIES TO DROUGHT

People in regional and remote areas may suffer from financial exclusion with bank branch closures, relatively high ATM fees and relatively less access to the internet and other digital services. The Centre for Social Impact research showed Indigenous people are much more likely to be severely financially excluded (43.1 per cent) compared to the national average (17.2 per cent). Residents in smaller towns now depleted without clean drinking water, like Wilcannia and Menindee, have far less access to appropriate banking services and experience very restricted financial support due to distance from local branches.

The provision of credit is an essential service, like water and power, to keep the rural economy operating. As we saw in the GFC rescue for the rich financial sector, credit can be created by government. The Reserve Bank should therefore step up and plan for a rural sector significantly impacted by drought and climate change, by anticipating the future instability and hardship this will cause.

This will be an ongoing problem, so a longer term financial solution must be considered, such as the establishment of a People's Bank - a more reliable, low-cost operation that could provide cheaper credit and affordable services, designed to meet customer needs, with greater transparency. By setting a high standard of operational integrity and as a role model, a People's Bank will inject real competition into a banking sector which has been damaged by revelations of malpractice and fraud. Through the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) a People's Bank could offer banking services online, via Post Offices and be more accessible and reliable in regional towns. This public bank could stop charging default interest during drought conditions and provide better protections in times of financial stress.

Many farmers were forced to sell property and other assets to get out of severe financial hardship and avoid insolvency due to the poor conduct of some financial institutions.

We need to establish a national scheme for farm debt mediation to reduce the stress and high suicide rates occurring in rural areas. These recommendations are from the Banking Royal Commission - to help avoid the overcharging and irresponsible lending practices many have experienced with private financial companies.

The government's 'drought loans' scheme is basically another subsidy to the commercial banks, as taxpayers will be reducing the bank's exposure to high risk rural farmers and businesses, who will be swapping bank loans, for interest – free government credit. This is not sustainable in the long term as the rural sector is unlikely to see drought conditions improve substantially. Privatized water is only going to become more expensive unless serious action is taken to create a far more equitable situation for stakeholders.

An independent assessment of marginal farms and businesses deemed at high risk of failing, or unsustainable, needs to be conducted. To prevent taxpayers subsidizing an increase in the desertification and loss of topsoil

occurring under the present land management in many marginal areas, the govt may need to provide compensation packages or buy out those farms and perhaps establish renewable energy projects.

It is clear that the NSW government 'drought package' is failing particular communities facing devastating hardship, when after consultations in Bourke on Nov 25<sup>th</sup> they announce a pipeline for Bourke, while both Walgett 200kms upstream and Wilcannia 400kms downstream don't have any water in the river, their drinking water is disgusting and salty. With high aboriginal populations, already living below the poverty line, with poor health outcomes, having excess salt in their water means turning to cheap unhealthy alternatives like soft drinks. The drought package appears to have focused solely on subsidies for farmers, while other struggling communities are still waiting to hear how the state will support them with clean drinking water. These towns will become un-inhabitable, with around 400 people having already left Wilcannia, now reliant on volunteers with 'charity water' for drinking - as government agencies have abandoned them. We heard cash-strapped families in towns also missing out, talk about spending around \$70 per week for drinking water.

#### TRANSITION AND RECOVERY FROM DROUGHT WHEN CONDITIONS IMPROVE

It is unrealistic to assume that there will be massive improvements when climate change is occurring and the predictions for Australia are so grim. We need to consider that much farmland will become overly dry, exhausted and 'unproductive' and will be abandoned for agricultural purposes. Compensation packages will be required or training provided for alternative land use projects, including re-wilding and bush regeneration. Transpiration of trees helps generate rain. Following this governments disastrous changes to the Native Vegetation Act, the so-called Biodiversity Protection Act has seen land clearing increase by 800% in just 3 years, according to data obtained by The Guardian under FOI. Legislation changes must occur to stop this highly destructive clear-felling, if we are to mitigate climate change impacts in rural Australia.

The future recovery of farming country deemed marginal or too dry, would be best managed by indigenous caretakers/traditional owners, in order to regenerate and nurture the land using their knowledge, to enable vulnerable ecosystems some chance of survival. A corresponding public investment to increase the numbers of Indigenous National Park rangers will ensure that the rehabilitation of unviable farmland will not only provide important regional employment – but also prevent further public funds being wasted on doomed agricultural endeavours, that are no longer possible under the changing climate conditions.

Now is the time to commence water testing and monitoring. Water filtration systems need to be properly maintained and the process to improve living conditions commenced immediately. This includes giving CLEAN WATER, TANKS and FILTRATION SYSTEMS to all stakeholders and households in river communities and the funding of 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

Sections of the Darling River have already experienced an extinction crisis, so 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.

## PREPAREDNESS FOR FUTURE DROUGHT EVENTS

Changes made in 2012 to the Barwon Darling Water Sharing Plan reversed original rules designed to prevent the decline of the river and halt the growth in water extractions. These changes were made without the assistance of any new science or data and with no consultation. It's been a fiasco.

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
- \* 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 mega pumps and ensure compliance.
- \* BAN WATER SPECULATION and TRADING.
- \* Jail water thieves and strip their water licenses.
- \* BAN floodplain harvesting.
- \* Instead of MORE dams, END 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.

## ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT GOVT PROGRAMS

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 over allocation 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 over allocation 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.

#### IMPACTS ON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The plight of drought-stricken farmers gets the governments attention while the Aboriginal people of the river have been pretty much forgotten. After 80,000 years, now 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 emus and kangaroos are dying of thirst.

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). Cultural flows must be returned and First Nations rights to water respected, as traditional guardians of river health, they must be an integral part of all decision making regarding the Water Sharing Plan.

The hundreds of people attending the corroboree held on the banks of the river in Wilcannia on October 1st, all joined together in the saddest lament – a song with the words ‘no Baaka, no Barkandji’. (See attached short film file.) Without the river, their cultural practices cannot continue, their culture will become extinct, like all the long neck turtles, fish, dragonflies etc no longer existing along the dry river, their Baaka. It was incredibly sad.