

**IMPACTS OF THE WATER AMENDMENT (RESTORING OUR RIVERS) ACT  
2023 ON NSW REGIONAL COMMUNITIES**

**Organisation:** Soroptimist International Griffith Inc

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## **NSW LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY INQUIRY into the IMPACTS OF THE WATER AMENDMENT (RESTORING OUR RIVERS) ACT 2023 ON NSW REGIONAL COMMUNITIES.**

Soroptimist International Griffith (along with Soroptimist Clubs in the former Soroptimist Region of Riverina) has been advocating about issues related to the Murray Darling Basin Plan (MDBP) since well before the Plan was finalised. Our main concern then is the same concern we have now: in doing everything possible to restore riverine environments to their former state (or as near as possible) there would end up not being enough water to grow food and support rural communities dependent on agriculture. (Former Region of Riverina clubs formed an alliance with the Water4Food group at the invitation of the group of councils known then as RAMROC. We held community meetings with mayors, councillors and community members around the Riverina/Murray to voice our concerns. Yes – rivers in the Murray Darling Basin need environmental flows but this must be balanced against the needs of food producers).

It is difficult for community members who are not directly involved in agriculture/buying water for crops to comment on the specific Terms of Reference for this Inquiry but we can comment as concerned members of our community.

The concerns voiced by Water4Food and many other groups before the MDBP was implemented have proved to be valid. Given the fact that European settlers have been changing the landscape and land use in the Murray Darling Basin for nearly 200 years the MDBP cannot expect to restore river health to where it was in the early 1800s. Those who live and work here now must also be protected. The food and fibre that is grown in the Basin is needed to support many Australians both in the MDB and beyond.

### **In relation to the Terms of Reference:**

- a) Irrigation communities have already suffered negative economic and social impacts from the MDBP. Repealing limits to the cap on Commonwealth water purchases will exacerbate these negative impacts.
- b) Until unlicensed take of water is properly policed and sanctioned there cannot be fairness in the system. Floodplain harvesting in the northern parts of the Basin is not monitored and environmental flows are estimated, not measured. Flood events do not contribute to estimating environmental flows. Different governments count flows in different ways. One trusted entity should be responsible for accounting for this finite resource properly, so that decisions made are based on reliable figures.
- c) d) The reliability of water allocations must be a high priority. Irrigators need this certainty to plan ahead.
- e) f) It would appear that past water reforms and community-based water reduction adjustment programs have played their part in reducing the amount of water used for agriculture, but the core concern is enough water for agriculture and enough water to support the environment. Water is a precious, finite resource. It must be shared in a balanced way.
- g) **Any related matter:**

The Government recently did away with the Socio-Economic Neutrality Impact Test. This needs to be reinstated immediately. Because the accounting for water (buy backs, flows, efficiency project results, harvesting etc) is not accurate, it would appear that more water has already been recovered than was mandated in the original Murray Darling Basin Plan. Rural communities need to be protected. Water buy

backs have resulted in social and economic hardship; they will continue to do so. There should be no more water buy backs.

Water quality is as important as water quantity. Poor water quality needs to be addressed. Pollution and salinity remain big issues but addressing the huge numbers of carp in the Murray Darling Basin rivers appears to be the most pressing issue. It is estimated that there are 350 million carp in the Basin. As a result there are 90% less native fish than in Pre-European times. Carp are voracious bottom feeders whose feeding method greatly increases water turbidity. They also destroy all the water weed growing on the river beds – these weeds are the natural water filters in the system. Carp are killing what's left of our rivers. Scientists have found ways to address the carp issue. Numbers could be reduced by 50%. A 50% reduction in carp numbers would see a dramatic improvement in water quality and the number of native fish.

The South Australian Lower Lakes were not fresh water lakes filled to the brim all year round before European settlement. This point does not seem to be mentioned very often. Admittedly, calls to remove the barrages will not be actioned, again because it is impossible to go back to pre-European conditions but the demands of the Lower Lakes must be balanced against the needs of the agricultural communities upstream. Man made barrages turned the Lower Lakes into fresh water lakes (now with huge housing developments and marinas). These barrages are also destroying the Coorong. There are good suggestions for how to address this problem which should be looked at.

It would appear that the Federal Government is planning to identify more wetlands etc to be flooded. Areas are not being identified properly which will result in environmental water being wasted on areas which should not receive environmental flows. Local knowledge needs to be part of the planning not just desk top modelling.

Water storage needs to be expanded. By increasing the storage capacity of key dams and utilising Lake Coolah near Narrandera as an additional water storage facility, a more reliable supply of water for irrigation, communities and the environment could be made available.

Yours sincerely



Elizabeth Mead

Secretary

Soroptimist International Griffith Inc (on behalf of our 31 members)