

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

**Organisation:** Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association  
**Date Received:** 5 May 2025



# MACQUARIE MARSHES ENVIRONMENTAL LANDHOLDERS ASSOCIATION

---

## Secretary

Justine Bucknell  
"Quambone Station"

## President

Garry Hall  
"The Mole"

The Chair  
Investment Industry and Regional Development Committee  
Parliament House  
6 Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

### **RE: Inquiry into the Impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW Regional Communities**

Please accept our submission on behalf of the Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, and we appreciate the extension given by your office.

#### **Introduction:**

The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA) was formed in 1995 when there was increasing pressure to further reduce water flows to the Macquarie Marshes. Its members are local landholders, many of whom are third and fourth generation landholders in the area, and all are dedicated to ensuring a healthy and productive marsh for future generations.

The aim of MMELA is:

***The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA) aims to ensure the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the internationally recognised Macquarie Marshes.***

The Macquarie Marshes is a large semi-permanent, **flow through** wetland on the lower end of the Macquarie River in central western NSW. It covers an area of approximately 200,000ha of which 12% is a Nature Reserve managed by the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS). The remaining 88% is privately owned freehold land which supports an extensive agricultural industry. Much of the land has been held in families for generations and the property owners have an extraordinary knowledge and understanding of all aspects of the Marshes and its management.

The Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve, "Wilgara" Wetland and U Block are listed on the **Ramsar Convention of Wetlands of International Importance**. The Nature Reserve is also listed on the **Japan - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (JAMBA)** and the **China - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (CAMBA)** along with several other agreements. It is the responsibility of the whole community, including State and Federal Governments, to ensure management of the wetland does not compromise values and/or obligations set out in the above mentioned agreements.

The Macquarie Marshes is unique both environmentally and economically. Research indicates it is the most important colonial nesting waterbird breeding site in Australia for species diversity and nesting density

(Kingsford and Thomas 1995). The majority of the breeding colonies are situated on privately owned land where landholders have managed and protected them since settlement. The Marshes also support an extensive cattle grazing industry which is its main economic focus. Sustainable grazing is encouraged by MMELA and the majority of landholders are acutely aware of the environmental needs of the wetland and undertake congruent management practices.

Government policy and decision making relating to natural resource management has in the past had devastating impacts on the Marshes, particularly water management, which has severely reduced water flows through river regulation and other such legislation.

When Burrendong Dam was completed, and irrigation was established throughout the Macquarie Valley scientific research showed flows to the internationally recognized Macquarie Marshes were greatly decreased. MMELA brought this to the attention of many governments and fought for water to be recovered for this diverse and unique wetland and its associated floodplain. As a result, both the NSW and Federal Governments introduced 'buyback' programs and improved efficiency schemes to halt the ongoing destruction of the Macquarie Marshes. It must be remembered that these programs only returned a small portion of the water originally taken from the Macquarie Marshes and the landholders who depend on its health and vitality to make their living.

Our community has survived through the massive change that has occurred because of the doubling of time intervals between important inundation events. The challenge that the Macquarie Marshes landholders have had to endure is far greater than the challenge that much of the agriculture sector is likely to face with the climate change predictions.

The irrigation sector is a part of the varied communities that make up the regional community in regional NSW, the irrigation sector **is not the spokespersons for the whole community**. For too long the input on policy development has been influenced by a loud irrigation sector. This must stop and policy developers need to be inclusive of all stakeholders.

MMELA have had representatives involved in environmental water management for over 20 years, it is well understood that the Macquarie is over allocated. With the purchase of water entitlements from willing sellers for the environment the benefits to our members have been largely unrecognized. We have been involved in 3 different grazing studies that have largely identified the role we play as land managers in the Macquarie Marshes. These are DEECCEW (Hugh Jones), UNSW (Will Wright) and MDBA RCS study of benefits as a result of the implementation of the Basin plan.

The Benefits of buybacks have been positive for our members as well as other stakeholders in the Macquarie and the northern basin. The Marshes have changed from being a wetland that was mostly wet with occasional dry periods **to a floodplain that is majority dry with occasional wet periods. The buybacks have played a critical role in increasing the wet periods and helped to keep the Macquarie River downstream of the Marshes ready to respond when wet periods return. This is critical in providing water to the community of Carinda, Brewarrina, Bourke and then down to Menindee.**

The Macquarie is a winter fed catchment in the Northern Basin and as such flows are often arriving in the Barwon when the other Northern tributaries are experiencing low or no flows.

### Impact on Reliability

MMELA members have experienced firsthand the impact of the NSW governments failures when allocating water. The Available water determination is set using historical inflow data (Drought of record 2004) when this has failed on 3 different occasions, in 2019/2020 water was allocated that was not available to both industry and the environment. As difficult as this was for many stakeholders, the real loss was to the environment. Large sections of the regulated reach were forced to dry up, resulting in massive losses to native fish. MMELA members (2 are Ramsar managers with international obligations) were forced to survive without river flow for many long months. When the dams and river has been completely emptied it extends the time for recovery to begin, resulting in irreversible damage to the Marshes.

MMELA supports a review into the DOR and our members must have an opportunity to be included.

### Impact of past water reform

**Our community has seen the benefits of buybacks, and we would like to see ongoing investment by both state and federal governments to recover even greater volumes.** Without this, governments are failing to comply with the international agreements they are signatories too. It must be remembered that the purchase of entitlement from willing sellers is a business decision, and the seller is free to do what they want with the money received. **It must also be remembered that not one cent was ever paid to MMELA members when the water was removed from the Macquarie Marshes, this impacted our community greatly.**

In conclusion, MMELA regard the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Act 2023 as a very positive step forward in realizing the importance of the sustainability of the Murray-Darling Basin, and protecting vital wetlands which act as a carbon sink.

Lifting the CAP on **voluntary** buybacks from **willing** sellers shifts the focus for future Basin outcome negotiations. This act is a start for the government to be on the right side of history.

Buybacks by far are the most economical, efficient and effective way of returning water to the river and returns some fairness to those downstream who have suffered from the gross wealth transfer created by unfettered upstream extraction. (1)

I have also attached links and references relevant to the benefits of buybacks.

Yours Faithfully

Garry Hall  
President  
Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association.  


(1)

**<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/608f6ee3994fb525aa27657d/t/60909819e725855253b5667a/1620088880761/MDBRC+REPORT+31.1.19.pdf>**

- Pages 61,62,63 of Responses to Terms of Reference

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/mar/14/murray-darling-buybacks-twice-as-cheap-as-efficiency-projects>

<https://www.unsw.edu.au/newsroom/news/2020/09/twenty-per-cent-less-water-in-murray-darling-rivers-than-expected>

[https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/westernplains-breakfast/kate-mcbride-mdbp-buybacks-and-menindee/102770394?utm\\_content=link&utm\\_medium=content\\_shared](https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/westernplains-breakfast/kate-mcbride-mdbp-buybacks-and-menindee/102770394?utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared)