Submission No 88

INQUIRY INTO WATER AUGMENTATION

Organisation: Murrumbidgee Council

Date received: 5 August 2016

MURRUMBIDGEE COUNCIL

Inquiry into Water Augmentation in Rural and Regional NSW

3 August 2016

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No.5
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir

Inquiry into Water Augmentation in Rural and Regional New South Wales

Murrumbidgee Council would like to congratulate the Legislative Council's Standing Committee and appreciates an opportunity to provide input into the matters set out in the Terms of Reference.

The Council and communities are very hopeful that the Standing Committee will adopt a long term visionary mindset that fully addresses the three equally important spheres of Environmental, Economic and Social considerations.

Historically, Murrumbidgee Council feels that past decisions made regarding the extremely valuable national resource of water have generally had a short term and politically motivated foundation. Hence the piecemeal and angst ridden environment that Australians are endeavouring to operate in at the present time.

There are very obvious signs of distress across all of the three spheres referred to above. The real outcomes are patently obvious and they have far reaching social and economic consequences for our rural and regional communities.

Council's responses to the matters contained in the Terms of Reference are as follows:-

TOR 1(a) – investigate the requirement for a water equation (demand and supply out to the middle of this century) for rural and regional NSW

If it is the intention of the Standing Committee that the equation is to address both supply and demand through to 2050, Council makes the point that a National approach to this identified issue would be most beneficial.

In this regard, it is a well known and often highlighted prediction that the world will need to double its food production by 2050 to meet ever increasing population growth and global food demand. Therefore, the agricultural requirements and demand for water resources will, without any doubt, grow exponentially.

ABS statistics indicate just for NSW alone the population projections are:-

- 2012 - 7.3 million people
- 2061 - 12.6 million people

In order to accommodate that NSW increase, there will be a need for an additional 83,000 hectares of land for housing development, which most likely will currently be used for prime agricultural purposes. Based on 400 square metre lots and 4 residents per dwelling, each using an average of 200 litres per day, the extra water required for that growth will be 38,690 ML per year. This does not take into consideration the need for community services such as hospitals, recreational grounds and other urban water requirements.

ToR 1 (b) – examine the suitability of existing New South Wales storages and any future schemes for augmentation of water supply for New South Wales, including the potential for aquifer recharge

In relation to aquifer recharge, it would firstly be necessary to identify areas of interest / source. Using an example of the Narrandera area on the Murrumbidgee River and heading west towards Hay, it may be possible to apply the methodology of the water buyback principle to acquire properties that have significant sand beds suitable for recharge and where floodwaters could be stored in deep aquifers for future use. These properties are more likely to be located on the southern side of the Murrumbidgee River floodplain. Importantly, this would be classified as High Security water.

Apparently this methodology has been successful in the Burdekin River area in northern Queensland to maintain freshwater beneath the agricultural lands. Of course, it would be essential to minimise any salt infiltration of fertile agricultural land.

ToR 1 (c) – review the NSW Government's response to the recommendations of the June 2013 Report by the Standing Committee on State Development on the adequacy of water storages in New South Wales

A considerable amount of study and analysis has already been commissioned, collected and analysed in relation to this vital work.

However, obvious points that need to be highlighted are as follows:-

- The need to challenge the data that indicates that the storages will be adequate for future population growth;
- If the storages are in fact inadequate to cope with population growth, then the storages will certainly also be inadequate for future development for industry, business, agriculture and recreation purposes, thus impacting severely on the national wellbeing;
- It appears that there is a lopsided distribution of available water resources, with South Australia being the main beneficiary and with New South Wales falling behind. For example, Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina are currently at full capacity despite low storages elsewhere;
- South Australia contributes only 58 GL from the South East drainage scheme. This should and could be increased.

ToR 1 (d) – examine the 50 year flood history in New South Wales, particularly in northern coastal New South Wales, including the financial and human cost

Considerable work has already been carried out on this matter over many years across all NSW river catchments. In an environment where common sense does not always prevail, it appears quite logical to our communities west of the NSW east coast that some of the coastal river systems such as the Clarence River in northern NSW, could be turned inland and feed into the Darling River system, so that the productive water potential can be maximised for agricultural and environmental opportunities.

ToR 1 (e) – examine technologies available to mitigate flood damage, including diversion schemes, and the scope of infrastructure needed to support water augmentation, by diversion, for rural and regional New South Wales

First and foremost, Australia must have the ability to successfully tame and manage the wild rivers. There needs to be the want and urgency to not only manage the rivers that fill and overflow at a rapid pace, but to have a mindset that acknowledges that these untapped waters are invaluable to increase availability in times of drought, which are so prevalent in Australia.

It is essential to have a National Water Strategic Plan that includes increased and renewed infrastructure that grows our nation's capacity, allows innovative river diversion measures and encourages access and usage growth.

A comprehensive strategic plan will allow all of us to better manage "flood damage" and achieve realistic outcomes. However, this will require a serious adjustment to current mindsets.

Specifically in the Riverina region, there is potential for the creation of a major water storage above Gundagai and downstream of Burrinjuck Dam. There are already vast amounts of data available in relation to this concept, linked specifically to the Lachlan, Murrumbidgee, Murray and Coleambally irrigation requirements.

It would be logical to make reference to this information when creating and implementing new methodology. Also it would be logical to link an open mindset that brings about optimum water management strategies and then advocate for the further creation of green power.

ToR 1 (f) – examine social, economic and environmental aspects of water management practices in New South Wales and international jurisdictions, including the following case studies:-

- ***i. Broken Hill town water supply / Menindee Lakes scheme***
- ***ii. South Western NSW water management practices***
- ***iii. North Western NSW water management practices***

i. Broken Hill town water supply / Menindee Lakes scheme

The solution appears quite obvious – turn back the Clarence River and feed into the Menindee Lakes. In following this line of thinking, considerations of concern are of course the limited depth and the associated evaporation.

There is a need to source deeper poundage that could become an alternative water source for Broken Hill.

A water pipe from the Murray River system must surely conflict with any environmental standpoint. This would surely place the already "stressed" river system at greater risk.

ii. and iii. South Western and North Western water management practices

The following general comments are made:-

a. Water management practices should be nationally based and follow a model that has flexibility;
b. Australia is a continent that has great variability. We need to acknowledge this variability, adjust the water access accordingly and don't be blinded with manipulated scientific data that is designed to suit a skewed agenda;
c. In this unique and diverse environment, Australia is a world leader in water management. We have difficulty in reconciling International Bodies telling Australians how to manage water;
d. We question the ability, or even the need, for International jurisdictions to intervene, influence, prioritise or comment on the development or review of Australia's water management;
e. Australia is at the cutting edge in putting into place innovative engineering solutions that address seepage, automation and infrastructure;
f. In highlighting the above, we fully support the need to take into account the "equitable weighting" of social, economic and environmental requirements across New South Wales. Access and equity are paramount considerations across all three drivers and should therefore be given equal weighting;
g. Many of the rules for water management were created as far back as 2002. Those times of ample water were prior to the millennium drought, which continued for ten years and which will have ramifications for generations to come.

There was a significant carryover of thinking from previous planning and an increased appetite to accommodate the environment, at the expense of the social and economic wellbeing of Murray Darling Basin communities.

ToR 1 (g) – the efficiency and sustainability of environmental water being managed by different State and Federal Government departments and agencies

From a Council and community perspective, we are not sufficiently informed as to the "outcomes" of environmental watering. The following questions need to be answered:-

- What are the real results of environmental watering ?
- What are the productivity measures used for assessing environmental watering ?
- Where are the reports that show communities that the intended flow-on benefits from environmental watering are in fact occurring (for example the Nimmie Caira project in south west NSW) ?

ToR 1 (h) – the management, appropriateness, efficiency and reporting of:-

i. inter-valley transfers
ii. conveyance and loss water
iii. carryover
iv. the management and reporting of the water market

i. Inter-valley transfers

Inter-valley transfers are necessary and are a non-negotiable lifeblood for the continuation and development of all industries and to facilitate future investment generally

ii. Conveyance and loss water

If it is not used "here" and is transferred downstream, it should also be classified as an environmental flow.

iii. Carryover

Where made by individuals, carryover should always be available, as it is seen as a management tool and a form of insurance for agricultural production and associated industries.

ToR 1 (i) – any other related matter

The following general comments and questions are made:-

a. Transparent and translucent flows is an area that needs re-visiting. For example, our communities have just experienced water being released from Burrinjuck Dam for environmental purposes during an extremely wet period, although storage levels were low
b. Should environmental flows carry a usage weighting ?
c. Should environmental water flows proceed even though significant rain events have just recently occurred ?
d. Should off- allocation flows have a dual weighting usage ?

Concluding Comments

1. The new Murrumbidgee Council incorporates two river systems, the Murrumbidgee and the Murray
2. Water is not only the lifeblood for our towns and communities, but is the prime economic driver for agriculture, industry and business
3. There is very little evidence of benefit at the coalface of the Murray Darling Basin Regional Economic Diversification Program funded projects
4. The reduction of available and accessible water has had the direct impact of loss of available jobs and therefore has exacerbated a compounding flow-on detrimental effect that undermines the sustainability of the region's service centres, which provide basic human rights for residents in health, education and other community and social services
5. The effect of less agricultural production leads to a greater reliance on imported goods, with the very real issues of poor quality and a largely increased biosecurity risk
6. Water buyback under the Murray Darling Basin Plan which focuses predominantly on the environment has put food and fibre production at grave risk and has threatened the long term viability of not only our agricultural industries and businesses, but all of the towns and communities in the Riverina region.

Council appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and would certainly be pleased to provide further information and comment to the Standing Committee at any Public Hearing proposed to be held in the near future.

Yours faithfully,

Austin Evans
Administrator
Murrumbidgee Council
35 Jerilderie Street
JERILDERIE NSW 2716