

Supplementary
Submission
No 106a

INQUIRY INTO WATER AUGMENTATION

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Rectify Copeton Dam / Gwydir River cold water pollution

Please join with me to seek a timeline for installation of a temperature control structure to rectify cold water pollution (CWP) discharges from Copeton Dam that for the past forty years has sterilised the Gwydir River and its aquatic species. This problem exists State-wide. Government reports classify eight dams as severely impacted and fourteen as moderate with 2000-3000 kilometres of rivers afflicted by CWP. One report suggests that in a worst case scenario CWP can extend for up to three hundred kilometres.

Obviously bottom water release is a legacy of poor dam design adopted on a grand scale. So how is it that this well researched and documented widespread institutionalised environmental disaster attracts scant public comment or activism for change? One possible reason is that most dams were built decades ago and in the absence of any effective or affordable remedy communities resigned themselves to CWP and its consequences.

However, the 2014 installation and successful trial of a world first innovative curtain at Burrendong Dam that surrounds the tower and harvests warm surface water for down-valley release potentially changes all that. My electronic petition is probably also a first within the State on this topic and hopefully may bring to life a 'sleeping' political issue.

Since before the last State election in 2015 I have been writing to the Hon Niall Blair Minister for Primary Industries and Minister for Lands and Water and to local member Hon Adam Marshall for a commitment with positive timelines to this remedial structure - to no avail.

In a 2015 survey conducted by the popular Caravan & Motor Home magazine the Gwydir River around Bingara was voted the best inland riverside camping spot in Australia. Despite its very scenic appearance, the Gwydir River from a fish, water rat and platypus perspective is but a pale shadow of its pre-dam glory. The value of the river to Bingara for tourism and socio economics is what the harbour is to Sydney. If Bingara is to prosper the first imperative is to restore desirable fish species and habitat.

Background

Copeton Dam construction was completed in 1976. The design incorporates no fish ladder and discharges bottom level water loaded with sediment. Copeton is rated the second worst cold water polluter under State Water control. Monitoring of CWP has established profound liveability and growth effects upon species including juvenile Silver Perch, Murray Cod and their food sources. Reports indicate that desirable fish species would recolonize if CWP were mitigated.

In July 2004 the NSW government adopted a cold water pollution strategy with five year stages of planning and implementation. In 2012 the NSW Cold Water Pollution Strategy reported on stage one. Numerous stage one issues were carried over into stage two. Reasons for lack of implementation included insufficient funding to advance the necessary science. The report also concluded that restocking CWP rivers with fingerlings is pointless due to the absence of algal or invertebrate food sources. High volume releases adopted since 2010/11 gets more water to the irrigators but bank erosion and siltation are unwanted side effects.

In this era of user pays the first 60- 100 kilometres of the Gwydir River is being used as a sewer to transmit water in its most efficient manner to irrigators and end users who should pay to help offset the severe disadvantages to the Bingara community.

In March 2014 tenders were advertised for design of mitigation measures for Copeton Dam.

In 2015 the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) deferred \$19.7 million from Copeton and other dams. Fisheries NSW declared their impatience with the delays and noted that legislation is not necessarily being adhered to and that State Water expenditure intended for CWP has been deferred for many years. Gwydir River comes under the Murray Darling Plan and this remediation is also behind schedule.

Copeton Dam on the Gwydir River is approximately thirty kilometres south west of Inverell between the townships of Bingara and Bundarra. Built principally for irrigation, the dam generates hydroelectricity and provides assured water supplies to Inverell and Bingara.

The temperature control structure installed at Burrendong Dam has not yet trialled under all dam level storage conditions.