

Submission
No 77

**INQUIRY INTO RATIONALE FOR, AND IMPACTS OF,
NEW DAMS AND OTHER WATER INFRASTRUCTURE IN
NSW**

Organisation: Mudgee District Environment Group

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Submission: Inquiry into the rationale for, and impacts of, new dams and other water infrastructure in NSW

Mudgee District Environment Group (MDEG), based in the Mid-Western Region local government area in NSW, is working for the conservation of our natural heritage and a sustainable future for our children.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on proposed water infrastructure projects in inland NSW.

This submission will focus on the Macquarie River Re-regulating Storage project below Dubbo.

Background:

Mudgee is on the Cudgegong River, a key tributary of the Macquarie River and part of the regulated river system. Windamere Dam, above Mudgee, captures flows from the headwaters of the Cudgegong. These are released to cover downstream water orders, base flows to the river with an end of system flow target, environmental flows and bulk water transfers to Burrendong Dam.

There is a 10 GL (billion litre) allocation to the Cudgegong River environment under the Macquarie-Cudgegong Regulated River Water Sharing Plan. However, this environmental water is re-socialised when it reaches Burrendong Dam. There is no protection for this planned environmental water once it leaves the Cudgegong Valley.

MDEG has advocated over the past 20 years that Cudgegong environmental water allowance is retained for environmental use downstream of Burrendong Dam. Instead, it is shared across all extractive licenses.

Therefore, general security license holders in the Macquarie Valley already have access to environmental water through rules in the water sharing plan.

The proposal to increase general security license access to natural flows below Burrendong Dam is not supported.

Re-regulation of the Macquarie River:

The natural inflows from the Talbragar River, Bell River, Little River and Coolbaggie Creek below Burrendong Dam are critical to the health of the regulated Macquarie.

Water orders in the Macquarie are already allocated from these flows as a means of holding water back in Burrendong Dam for future use. This use of tributary inflow is tagged as if it had been released from the dam.

The proposal to construct a new weir at Gin Gin to capture an additional 6 GL in a 30 km pool to increase extraction by downstream general security license holders will cause additional environmental harm.

The problem of over-allocation of water in the Macquarie has not been solved. Burrendong Dam was assessed to yield on average 406 GL. Total allocation is now 899 GL. The proposed additional mid-river storage will only serve to exacerbate the problem.

This project is predicted to cost the NSW public at least \$30m. A costs benefits analysis has not been provided to understand the long term impacts.

Environmental Impacts

The Macquarie River system is just coming out of the worst drought on record with major fish kills and the river disconnected below the Warren weir.

The first new water to arrive to the parched system in February 2020 was opened up for extraction through floodplain harvesting and supplementary water access.

The Macquarie supports one of the most significant wetland areas in inland Australia, the Ramsar listed Macquarie Marshes. These wetlands support the largest reed beds in the Murray-Darling Basin and have hosted the most diverse range of colonial-nesting water bird species.

The extent of the Marshes has shrunk significantly over the past 20 years. The natural inflows from tributaries below Burrendong Dam are critical to provide the necessary antecedent conditions for the most efficient use of environmental water allocations held in the dam.

The loss of more of these flows through capture in a raised Gin Gin weir will cause further harm to the Marshes and accelerate their long-term decline.

The loss of these natural inflows will also impact on the movement of native fish species in the lower river reaches including connectivity to the Barwon-Darling River. Impacts on fish food sources, breeding sites and ideal breeding opportunities will also increase.

Threatened fish species in the Macquarie River include the critically endangered Silver Perch, endangered Trout Cod and vulnerable Murray Cod listed under the Federal EPBC Act and the Eel-tailed Catfish, Olive Perchlet, and Southern Purple Spotted Gudgeon, listed as threatened and endangered under the NSW Fisheries Management Act.

First Nations cultural heritage values will also be impacted by the project, both at the weir pool and downstream. River health is very important to First Nations people.

MDEG has not seen any clear justification for the proposal by WaterNSW to further impound water in the mid-Macquarie.

WaterNSW has failed to meet legal obligations to construct fishways on three weirs in the Macquarie, including the current weir at Gin Gin. This agency cannot be trusted to manage water infrastructure in a manner that minimises and mitigates environmental harm.

MDEG recommends that the current weir at Gin Gin is repaired to its existing height with the required fishway constructed to improved fish migration within the river.

Yours sincerely

Phyllis Setchell
President