

Submission
No 119

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

Organisation: Tolarno Station 1851 Pty Ltd

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Chair

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

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Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning And Environment

NSW Legislative Council

Submission on the rationale for, and impacts of, new dams and other water infrastructure in NSW

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry investigating the rationale for, and impacts of, new dams and other water infrastructure in NSW.

The NSW Government's announcement on a number of major water infrastructure projects has raised concerns for many communities on the Murray-Darling. We make this submission with specific regard to the following projects, and the discussion is framed in three parts:

- The Menindee Lakes Water Savings Project
- The Western Weirs project
- The Mole River Dam, the Dungowan Dam and the Macquarie River reregulating storage project.

Our concerns regarding these major infrastructure projects are in light of the continued failings of the NSW Government to address systemic mismanagement and maladministration in regards to management of water in the Darling River and its tributaries.

Background

We own three properties totalling 500,000 acres on the Lower Darling, approximately 50 km south of the Menindee Lakes.

The Lower Darling, a 500km stretch of river which includes the Menindee Lakes, is integral to the social, cultural and economic livelihood of the communities of Menindee, Pooncarie, Ellerslie and Wentworth. It is the traditional lands of the Barkindji Nation, who have continued connection to the river and country.

Tolarno Station sits on the Darling River, and all three properties depend on the Darling for livestock and domestic purposes. The properties have a rich history spanning 160 years, and today run merino sheep, cattle and rangeland goats.

The Lower Darling is a profitable agricultural community with predominantly pastoral and cropping production, including sheep, cattle and rangeland goats. There was, until recently due to the impact of substantial reduction in water availability and quality in the Lower Darling, a strong citrus production industry. The area has a long and rich history in

agriculture, dating back to the 1820s. The industry requires a healthy, sustainable river system for economic viability, with properties dependent on pumping small quantities of water for stock and domestic purposes or crops, either directly from the river or from groundwater replenished by the river.

The Menindee Lakes Water Savings Project

The NSW Government proposed the Menindee Lakes Water Savings Project as a Supply Measure under the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism of the Murray Darling Basin Plan. This proposal sought to reduce evaporation in the Menindee Lakes by substantially reducing the length of time water is held in the lakes. This proposal includes operational management changes and infrastructure works. The project will not provide environmental, sociocultural or economic benefits for the Lower Darling and communities, on the contrary it will devastate our river and our communities. The rationale for the project is that it prevents buy-backs of water from willing sellers under the Murray Darling Basin Plan. This is despite the economic efficiency of water buy-backs in comparison to infrastructure projects.

In 2017, the Murray Darling Basin Authority released a report highlighting significant concerns with this project:

- the absence of an environmental impact statement,
- failure to address potential risks and impacts to downstream users, including reliability of supply, water quality and interactions with planned environmental water,
- the potential for adverse ecological impacts given the filling regime of the Lakes will be much dryer than natural occurrences,
- failure to address mitigation measures,
- potential loss of habitat of the Golden Perch nursery (a significant nursery in for the entire Basin),
- questions about the environmental outcomes previously achieved through other projects undertaken by the NSW Government, in particular the Great Darling Anabranch Pipeline project,
- falling outside the MDBA's framework for testing environmental equivalence.

There are further concerns held by ourselves and more broadly across the Lower Darling communities:

- The available evidence on the proposed Project reports there will be significant ecological damage to the Menindee Lakes and Lower Darling, including but not limited to river and floodplain ecosystems and fish and birds populations.
- Modelling of flows suggests that the Lower Darling will be in a cease to flow state a majority of the time. Beyond the clear environmental impacts, there will be significant cultural, social and economic impacts for the affected communities.
- There has little consultation with communities regarding the project, or the impact on lake levels and permanent flows down the Lower Darling. Consultation with a Stakeholder Advisory Group commenced in mid 2019, however these discussions have stalled due to the NSW Government's failure to protect river connectivity for the Lower Darling by placing the environment and water for critical needs above those of

irrigation extraction¹. Consultation is still in its infancy with wider community, with no set of options presented to Lower Darling communities beyond the original business case.

- The most recently submitted Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan, new legislation on floodplain harvesting, and increased extraction in other upstream catchments directly undermine the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the success of this project. The impacts of increased extraction and decreased flow to Menindee on the project have not been investigated/made public.
- It is alleged that documents specifically related to this project were confidentially released to a select group of irrigators by NSW Government employees. All investigations relating to this matter, and other allegations related to flows into the Menindee Lakes and Lower Darling should be completed, and issues resolved, prior to progression of this project.

In its current form, the community is strongly opposed to this project. We are committed to ensuring that the project is either implemented in a transparent and honest manner and without major adverse environment, cultural, social or economic impacts to our region, or is stopped.

The Western Weirs project

The Western Weirs project is considering the introduction of additional infrastructure along the Barwon-Darling and Lower Darling as part of a holistic management of the rivers. We support in principle both the approach to holistic management and the construction of small rock weirs along the Barwon-Darling and Lower Darling. Such rock weirs were present prior to European settlement, and have since been damaged and deconstructed.

We have concerns, given the systemic mismanagement of the Darling River and tributaries by the current NSW Government, that such a project will be undertaken in a transparent manner. In particular, we have concerns that any new infrastructure may be used to privilege access to irrigators for extraction. Whilst this is not the intent of those who proposed this project, there must be strong safeguards to ensure that any infrastructure enhances river connectivity and does not risk river ecosystems, including fish passage.

The Mole River Dam, the Dungowan Dam and the Macquarie River reregulating storage projects

These projects are in upstream tributaries of the Darling River. All three projects pose a risk to flows down the Darling River as they capture and store water upstream. There is no requirement for consideration of downstream impacts, such as increased number of periods of cease to flow, within the environmental assessment of these projects. There is a need for these projects to undergo rigorous and transparent planning processes, including environmental assessment which assesses impacts across the Murray-Darling Basin.

¹ Katharine McBride sits on the Stakeholder Advisory Group. The information provided in this submission is public knowledge, and not information exclusive to the SAG.

We thank the committee for undertaking this inquiry into a matter which is of great importance to far-western NSW communities, and for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. We would be happy to expand further any of our above comments.

Kind regards,

Robert McBride

Katharine McBride

Tolarno, Peppora and Wyoming Stations