

Submission  
No 139

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

**Organisation:** Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition Inc

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Portfolio Committee No 7  
Legislative Council  
Parliament of NSW  
Macquarie St  
SYDNEY

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

The Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition (CVCC), a NSW Northern Rivers community group, founded in 1988, has had a long-term interest in water and its management and the maintenance of river health in our local area and further afield.

The CVCC commends Portfolio Committee No 7 for undertaking this inquiry. As these WaterNSW projects involve huge expense and are being fast-tracked, there is a very great need for transparency so that the whole community can be confident that taxpayer funds are being wisely spent and river system health will not be further compromised.

In this brief submission the CVCC comments on aspects of the new dam projects and a related matter which we expect will be raised in some of the submissions received from entities west of the Great Dividing Range.

**1) Comments on aspects of the new dam/water storage projects**

1. The CVCC understands the importance of agricultural industries in the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) to the state and national economies as well as to Australian consumers.

2. Although the WaterNSW projects have no direct impact on this organisation or our immediate area, we have concerns about the way the water resources in the Basin have been managed and the on-going undermining of the original concept of the Basin Plan by interest groups and politicians/governments. It is inexplicable that many of these people/groups do not comprehend that the long-term health of the industries in the Basin is dependent on the long-term health of the river systems. However, given the short-termism of many industry lobbyists and politicians, this is probably unsurprising.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Two articles on MDB issues in the CVCC “Voices for the Earth” column published in The Daily Examiner in February and July 2019 are attached at the end of this submission.

3. Rivers and groundwater are more than irrigation channels and water management is not just about providing water for irrigators. It is also about ensuring that our rivers and groundwater are managed in an ecologically sustainable manner so that dependent ecosystems are protected.

4. Consideration of two of these projects – the new dam on the Mole River and the raising of the wall of the Wyangala Dam – leads to the conclusion that the major reason for these massive projects is providing more water for irrigators. More water for irrigators means expansion of irrigated crops which ultimately means less water for the river systems as well as less water for downstream users. Complaints from MDB downstream users about their diminishing share of water have been increasing over recent years. While drought has certainly had an impact, other matters, including political wrangling, floodplain harvesting and issues with the water market, have been raised as reasons for this situation<sup>2</sup>.

5. The new Upper Mole River Dam with a storage capacity of 100-200 GL is estimated to cost \$355 million. One of the major benefits of this very large dam cited in the feasibility study<sup>3</sup> is to provide irrigators with greater supply security which could enable them to move into more high-value crops such as almonds. This is interesting given the issues about the impact the expansion of water-hungry almonds have had on the water market in the south of the state.<sup>4</sup>

6. Greater supply security is not guaranteed by building a new dam like the proposed Mole River Dam or enlarging an existing one like Wyangala. Obviously substantial rain is needed to fill them and ongoing rain to keep them topped up. Just how much consideration has been given to the likely impacts of climate change in relation to these expensive water projects? Is the Government wasting money on what might become expensive white elephants?

7. An existing dam – Pindari - in the same general area as the proposed Mole River Dam is at 17.1% of capacity today (September 22) and has been at a very low level for a number of years. This is a 312 GL dam, built in the late 1960s and enlarged in 1994 when its capacity was increased eight-fold. The current outlook for Pindari, as outlined in the current WaterNSW Border Rivers Operation Plan<sup>5</sup>, is not at all promising.

8. Wyangala Dam, with a current storage capacity 1,217 GL, was completed in 1935 and enlarged in 1971 when capacity was quadrupled. It is currently 59.2% of capacity. So now WaterNSW is planning a third expansion of this dam.

9. NSW is obviously entering a new dam-building/dam-enlarging phase which is not restricted to the Murray Darling Basin.<sup>6</sup> While it might be argued that these projects will provide greater security in a time when the climate is changing, the increasing frequency of severe droughts associated with climate change raise serious questions about their viability. An interesting question is – just how often

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/14/water-wars-will-politics-destroy-the-murray-darling-basin-plan-and-the-river-system-itself>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/sep/21/murray-darling-basin-fight-looms-over-nsw-plan-to-license-floodplain-harvesting>

<sup>3</sup> p. 15, [https://www.waternsw.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/159827/Mole-River-Dam-Feasibility-Study.pdf](https://www.waternsw.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/159827/Mole-River-Dam-Feasibility-Study.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/on-their-knees-drought-and-nuts-blamed-for-decimating-food-sector-20191024-p53441.html>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.waternsw.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/150875/Border-Rivers-Valley-Annual-Operations-Plan-Water-Year-2019-20.pdf](https://www.waternsw.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/150875/Border-Rivers-Valley-Annual-Operations-Plan-Water-Year-2019-20.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Rous Water, the water instrumentality for the LGAs of Lismore, Ballina and Byron is proposing to augment its water supply by building the 20-50 GL Dunoon Dam which will inundate the ecologically significant Channon Gorge. This proposal is strongly opposed by many in the local community.

and just how sensible is it to keep enlarging existing dams? Obviously every enlargement has impacts – environmental and social and economic.

10. There have been a number of wake-up calls in relation to water management in the MDB in recent years. These included the ABC “Four Corners” expose on water theft in July 2017, the massive fish kills in the Lower Darling in recent years, and concerns about WaterNSW’s record on monitoring and compliance in the Basin. It may be that this move to build more dams will result in another wake-up call some time in the future.

## **II) Information on a matter which may be raised in submissions from entities west of the Great Dividing Range**

1. The size of the Clarence River system and the fact that it is to a large extent in a natural state have made it a “resource” of interest to some groups well beyond the Clarence catchment. Diversion proposals involving massive dams and tunnels have been put forward on a regular basis for many years. Mostly they have originated from the state’s west but there have also been other proposals from north of the border.

2. For this reason the CVCC believes that there is a likelihood of some entities in the west of the state raising once again through this inquiry the need to have coastal rivers – and specifically the Clarence - diverted to the west in order to shore up their irrigation industries and improve the ailing health of MDB rivers.<sup>7</sup>

3. There is very strong local opposition to any proposal to divert any part of this river system from its catchment because of the threat to the system’s health which is very important to the Clarence community and the industries which depend on it.

4. If this matter is raised and is subject to consideration by the Committee, the Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition (and very likely other community groups and individuals) would appreciate the opportunity to have further input to the Committee on the issue.

Leonie Blain  
Hon Secretary

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<sup>7</sup> “Diverting the Clarence again on the agenda”, a CVCC article in the “Voices for the Earth” column published in The Daily Examiner on May 28, 2018, is attached at the end of this submission.

## **Additional Material from the CVCC's Voices for the Earth column.**

### **Politicians and Murray-Darling Basin Health**

The recent fish kills in the lower Darling River have led to considerable scrutiny of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) Plan and the role of the MDB Authority and politicians in the management of this very important river system which covers an area of more than one million square km, 14% of Australia's land area.

The community is being told by the NSW Minister for Water Niall Blair and the Federal Minister for Water David Littleproud that the devastating fish kills are a result of the current drought. Undoubtedly it is comforting for these politicians to be able to sheet the blame on something which they would argue they had no control over. And unsurprisingly it's a claim also made by the NSW Irrigators Council. Such a simple explanation – but is it credible?

Many others have a very different view of the reason for this environmental disaster. One view relates to the management of the MDB Plan – something highlighted by the ABC Four Corners program in July 2017 which revealed serious irregularities including water theft and meter tampering. Another view is that the water in the system is over-allocated to irrigators – particularly in the north of the Basin. As scientist Richard Kingsford pointed out recently:

“Irrigation now diverts just under half the water that once used to keep the Darling River healthy. If the river had this water, it would have more connected pools and less algal blooms, and more escape routes for the fish. We have imposed a ‘river drought’ on the Darling, much harsher than a drought measured in rainfall.”

Scientists have criticised the decisions about environmental water allocations (needed to maintain river health) because they were not based on science. Unsurprisingly Water Minister Littleproud disputes this.

Also the bureaucrats in the MDB Authority have been criticised for their failures in managing the Plan.

However, the major responsibility for the failure of the Plan has been the interference of politicians who have cosied up to big irrigator interests. In particular Littleproud, Barnaby Joyce, Niall Blair and his state predecessors have a lot to answer for.

- Leonie Blain

*Published in The Daily Examiner on Monday February 11, 2019.*

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### **More on the Murray-Darling Basin**

The Murray-Darling Basin continues to be in the news. This is not surprising given the disastrous fish kills in the Lower Darling in December and January, water shortages in towns along the river system and the continuing drought.

Recently in its program “Splash Cash” Four Corners aired concerns from scientists and some irrigators about government funding under the Basin Plan. Taxpayer funds are provided for the installation of water-saving infrastructure so that water can be recovered for the environment and thus protect river health.

The program aired concerns about transparency, the expansion of irrigation into water-hungry new crops (almonds and walnuts) and increased cotton farming along the Murrumbidgee. Large irrigators have been receiving millions which has allowed them to expand the land they are irrigating and in some cases to grow new crops.

According to University of NSW ecologist Professor Richard Kingsford, “We’re degrading the rivers at the same time as handing out money to a few individuals to release huge economic gains at public cost.”

Last week the Natural Resources Commission (NRC), which is an independent authority providing advice to the State Government, released its Draft Review of the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling. The review was brought forward at the request of former NSW Water Minister Niall Blair following the fish kills in the Lower Darling.

The review paints a grim picture, saying the Barwon-Darling is an ecosystem in crisis and that communities along the river are also in extreme stress.

The Review states: “The Water Management Act 2000 (the Act) clearly prioritises protection of the water source and dependent ecosystems, followed by basic landholder rights including native title, and then other extractive uses. The current Plan has not effectively achieved this prioritisation.”

Issues the Review raises include past changes to the water sharing rules which benefited “the economic interests of a few upstream users over the ecological and social needs of the many” as well as failure to effectively address climate change in the Plan.

The Review calls on the NSW Government to make urgent changes to the Plan.

How effective will the Government’s response be?

- Leonie Blain

*Published in The Daily Examiner on Monday July 29, 2019.*

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### **Diverting the Clarence Again on the Agenda**

Calls to divert the waters of the Clarence River occur regularly. The latest calls have come from Griffith (once again) in the south-west and Toowoomba to our north.

One of the claims of those promoting dams and diversions is that the water flowing out to sea from the Clarence is wasted.

That is missing the point of the function of natural waterways. They are not concrete-lined drains constructed by engineers to serve humankind. Rivers have developed over millennia to perform geomorphic and ecological functions which involve interactions with the landscape and the myriad of life forms which depend on their water.

All major diversion schemes obviously involve the construction of large dams. Those dreaming of a western diversion envisaged something like a Snowy Scheme of the north with massive tunnels and pumps. Such a scheme would lead to the Clarence below the dam being as degraded as the Snowy River became as a result of the Snowy Scheme.

And if the water was diverted to the Murray-Darling Basin, as those in Griffith and elsewhere over the range would like, would it be used to improve the health of the river systems there or to allow expansion of the cotton industry in the north and horticulture in the south?

Another suggestion is that humankind downstream would benefit if there was a massive dam built on the Clarence for flood protection. In floodtime, particularly when there are very heavy falls across the entire catchment, the volume of water flowing down the Clarence is huge. How big would a flood protection dam have to be? Just how realistic is this idea?

While floods cause problems for humans on floodplains, they are vital to the rejuvenation of the river system. The health of the Clarence and the industries which rely on it – like our important fishing industry - would be severely impacted if such a dam were built just as it would be if the river was dammed for a diversion.

One way of keeping the Clarence River healthy is to ensure that there are no further diversions or dams.

*- Leonie Blain*

*This article was published in The Daily Examiner on Monday May 28, 2018.*