

**Submission  
No 160**

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

**Name:** Ms Anne Reeves  
**Date Received:** 22 September 2020

---

Cate Faerhmann  
Chairperson, Portfolio Committee No 7  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St Sydney NSW 2000

## SUBMISSION

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

I wish to thank the Committee for the opportunity comment on this timely appraisal of proposals on mass water storages and related matters which carry far reaching consequences for the health of the Murray Darling river, wetland and floodplain system.

I have been actively engaged in seeking to improve best practice management of the Murray Darling for almost sixty years, initially as a South Australian, now living in NSW: and although a city resident I have been deeply involved in government and non-government processes concerned with water management across the Murray Darling Basin, to the extent that at one stage I was greeted when in western NSW with the comment "oh I thought you lived in Dubbo". I consider that the wellbeing of all Australians rests in large part on how well and equitably we manage our natural land and water resources for the long term.

This submission , written as an individual, draws on my personal experience and knowledge in response to the Terms of Reference.

#### **a): the need for the projects, including the historical allocation of water and consideration of other options for ensuring water security in inland regions**

Water security in this dry continent has always been a challenge

The expansion of settlement and an increasingly sophisticated ability to store and extract water for domestic and farming purposes has profoundly modified the landscape of inland Australia over the past two hundred years. This has enabled establishment and growth of settlements and industry creating great wealth. However this wealth has not been distributed equitably, with many terrible consequences for the indigenous peoples and for the biodiverse world in which they lived.

Post settlement as technology improved and irrigation developed, the capacity to store water and to extract ground water enabled expansion of pastoral and agricultural/horticultural capacity, leading to increasingly rapid modification of the landscape through grazing, vegetation clearance, laser-levelling and water storage construction. Entrepreneurial advances have largely been ahead of any rules to ensure equity and sustainability. The 2017 NSW Matthews Report, reflects this in its identification of risks with planning the implementation of the reforms then proposed.

Ongoing concerns are the failure to ensure the modelling used in determining water sharing rules takes into account recent and ongoing changes in climate, leading to

extreme instances of water allocations greater than available. This is further distorted by an 'averaging' approach which fails to reflect the 'drought or plenty' extremes under which the inland river systems and dependent wildlife have evolved.

Along with a reliable audit of take and 'no meter no pump' rules, rectifying these distortions, as well discussed in several recent reports post the dramatic fish deaths of the 2018-2019 summer, is in general a better investment for improving water security though increased water storage capacity.

**(b): the economic rationale and business case of each of the projects, including funding, projected revenue, and the allocation and pricing of water from the projects**

The lack of a publicly available business case for these projects is unacceptable, indeed embarrassing. In proceeding to fast track these proposals it would seem that the government is unilaterally overturning previously agreed policy set down through COAG in the 2004 National Water Initiative. (see. clause 69 *Investment in new or refurbished infrastructure* states "The parties agree to ensure that proposals for new or refurbished infrastructure continue to be assessed as economically viable and ecologically sustainable prior to the investment occurring").

The Mole River and Dungowan Dams proposals particularly remind of Bert Kelly, the former Modest Member of Parliament, who claimed he felt an election coming on when talk of a new dam arose.

**(c) the environmental, cultural, social and economic impacts of the projects, including their impact on any national or state water agreements, or international environmental obligations.**

The adverse impacts of dams and other barriers generally has been well documented: the 2000 World Commission on Big Dams Inquiry and subsequent literature has explored how best to reconcile demands for economic growth with equitable and ecologically sustainable management.

The projects specifically listed for consideration in this Inquiry all carry adverse environmental, cultural and social impacts, while the claimed economic benefits have as yet not been adequately substantiated.

Most recently, and pertinent to this Inquiry, is Professor Richard Kingsford's submission to the EPBC Act referral 2020/8652 with respect to the Macquarie Re-regulating storage.

The Western Weirs program picks up on aspects of the NSW State Weirs Review of some twenty years ago. The intention to document and, if no longer needed, to decommission barriers within the river systems is commendable. In undertaking this program each individual barrier should be evaluated while also taking into account the cumulative impact of the suite of barriers under consideration.

Any barriers retained should include provision for passage of native fish and other biota. Weirs retained should not be used to increase the volume of water extraction for other than essential human and environmental needs.

**(d) the impacts of climate change on inland waterways, including future projections, and the role of dams and other mass water storage projects in ensuring security of water supply for social, economic and environmental outcomes**

The well documented ongoing change in climate includes predictions of increasingly extreme weather events. Long characterised as a land of drought or plenty, it is no longer appropriate to maintain a knee-jerk 'build another dam' response to water security. The failure to adequately factor in up-to-date climate change trends when determining extractive water sharing rules has led over-allocation and fostered a sense of entitlement that cannot be delivered. This is not a sustainable situation.

**(e) water infrastructure technologies that may promote enhanced environmental outcomes**

Whatever innovations have already and may yet emerge, it is important to understand that river systems, from upper catchment through tributaries, wetlands, floodplains and estuaries, function as an interconnected dynamic system. Successful enhancement of environmental outcomes will depend on a wholistic approach. Technologies that foster integration of land, water and dependent biota within the catchment and beyond are needed.

**(f) any other related matter**

The events over the past two years which inter alia led to acute water shortages in some inland areas provide a wake-up call. A scatter of fast tracked infrastructure projects will not solve the problems of water security in our inland, let alone sustain a healthy river system. It is time to collaboratively implement provision for the sustainable and integrated management of the water sources of the State for the benefit of both present and future generations as set down in the 2000 NSW Water Management Act. Investment in western NSW to improve equitable environmental, cultural and social, as well as economic, well being is overdue but is more than about water alone as is made clear in these objectives.

Anne E Reeves, OAM  
Tuesday 22 September 2020