

**Submission  
No 23**

## **INQUIRY INTO FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING**

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## SUBMISSION TO NSW SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON INQUIRY INTO FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING

**From: Jan Beer “Cheviot Hills”, Yea, Victoria**

Floodplain harvesting in the northern Murray Darling Basin has reduced the volume of water available to downstream river systems by redirecting flood flows into large and in many cases illegal storages, thus decreasing the connectivity of the northern basin with the southern basin. Floodplain harvesting has been allowed to grow unchecked, thus eroding the reliability of water supply to existing downstream water users. Successive governments have for the last 25 years, turned a blind eye to Floodplain Harvesting capture in the northern basin, which has allowed irrigation on a vast scale to increase exponentially to the detriment of water availability in the southern basin.

Floodplain harvesting has in the majority of cases been illegal, unlicensed and unregulated, in stark contrast to the southern connected basin, where all water take is licensed and monitored to the very last litre.

Southern communities are extremely angry, in that they have been severely impacted by the recovery of vast volumes of water for the environment, whilst those harvesting floodplain water in the northern basin have continued to increase their take year on year since 1994 when a cap was supposed to be in place. Hence storages in northern NSW catchments have increased from 574GL in 1994 to 1397GL in 2020. This unchallenged, insatiable, illegal grab for unlicensed and unmetered water in the northern basin has had a profound detrimental effect environmentally, socially and economically on the southern basin

“The Menindee Lakes scheme delivers water to South Australia to meet part of its annual entitlement (39% on average)” and “[At times when there is no requirement to release water to supply the River Murray, flows in the lower Darling River are set to supply losses and demand in the river and to provide dilution flows,](#)” -Page 123-124 Report of the River Murray Scientific Panel on Environmental Flows-Dartmouth to Wellington and the Lower Darling River June 2000

The document, Assessment of Environmental Water Requirements for the Proposed Basin Plan-Lower Darling River System 2012 also states Page 8- “[The Menindee Lakes supply part\(approximately 39% \) of annual entitlement flows to South Australia.](#)”

The year on year increase in floodplain harvesting in the northern basin, which has seen the complete disconnect of the Darling River flows, means that the southern basin upstream river systems have had to supply this extra 39%. The impacts of this have been:

1. Increased conveyance losses in a drying climate scenario as water to supply SA must come from upstream storages, Dartmouth, Hume and Eildon with a far greater distance to travel to SA border than from the Darling River.
2. Higher volumes travelling longer distances are causing environmental degradation with bank erosion and slumping, fall of mature river gums, destruction of bank vegetation,
3. High flows continually breaching natural constraints such as the Barmah Choke causing sediment build up and unseasonal flooding of the forest.

4. Less water available in the consumptive pool for food production due to increased run of river or conveyance losses. In 2019 the Murray Valley suffered a man made drought. Whilst it languished on 0% allocations and landholders watched their crops wither and die, the Barmah Forest was flooded for nearly 4 months in order to deliver water downstream.
5. Further reduction to the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District(GMID) consumptive pool, has reduced production of our core food staples such as milk, rice, flour milling products.

The Menindee Lakes system is one of the most important ecosystems in the southern basin, supporting more bird species than Kakadu and important fish breeding events. Flows to Menindee have been sacrificed with community, environment and industry along the Darling-Baaka being severely impacted by illegal, unlicensed floodplain harvesting in the northern basin

Licensing floodplain harvesting extractions is an effective way to manage significant floodplain harvesting activities when essential measurement and monitoring regimes are in place. This will provide certainty and security for eligible floodplain water users to access the resource and ensure that water use remains within sustainable limits.

Floodplain harvesting infrastructure and works must be authorised and all water take licensed, as unauthorised and unregulated works can and have, dramatically restricted and diverted the flow of water across the floodplain, affecting other users, environmental assets and particularly downstream users and systems, such as the iconic Darling River and Menindee Lakes.

It is very obvious that the location and size of floodplain harvesting works can be shown with modern day technology. This infrastructure can be compared to that of the last 25 years and in conjunction with stream flow gauging the volume of floodplain harvesting can be quantified, so that the unauthorised, unlicensed growth of floodplain take can be transparently shown.

It is absolutely essential that measurement of all floodplain flow, catchment by catchment, be undertaken so that volumes that have been illegally taken over the last 25 years can be recovered.

Climate change and its impact on the entire Murray Darling Basin must also be taken into consideration when decisions are made as to the allowable volume of floodplain harvesting.

The Independent Review of NSW FPH Policy Implementation –Final Report – July, 2019, Page 62 states- [“No climate change scenarios have been considered in the modelling work and are not proposed at this stage.”](#) (the Department pers comm January 2019).

A major problem with floodplain harvesting is not just the take of ‘first flush flows’, but the constant take of smaller flows that rob the Lower Darling of a sustainable flow.

Three times in the NSW Parliament, floodplain harvesting regulations have been disallowed, as it was recognised that this would have made legitimate and permanent water take in the northern basin that is not and never has been licensed, metered or even accounted for under the cap.

The regulations put forward, supported a significant increase above the legislated legal 1994 Cap level and included a 500 per cent carryover, which would have effectively stopped the Darling from flowing and would have permanently taken 721,000ML of water from Victorian and NSW agriculture, our irrigation dependent businesses, communities, and environment.

The 500% carryover proposal would mean that the northern rivers and catchments would owe irrigators in this region water- a ridiculous, unworkable proposal.

These regulations show little concern for the southern connected basin and instead support a massive displacement of water resources and \$4billion in licenses to a select small group of corporate cotton growers in the north-- a \$2billion industry prioritised over \$24 billion and 20,000 jobs in the southern basin.

The Basin cannot be managed as two separate basins, as is currently happening with the northern basin level of take being treated entirely differently to that of the southern basin.

There must be:

1. An immediate embargo placed on all new works/ infrastructure that would result in any additional floodplain harvesting.
2. All existing works and licences to be investigated as to volume of extraction and restrictions or modifications put in place to bring in line with 1994 cap.
3. All pumps to be metered.
4. All works/ infrastructure to be licensed.

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END OF SUBMISSION