

## **INQUIRY INTO FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING**

**Name:** Penny Auburn

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I object to the NSW government's proposed licensing and legalisation of floodplain harvesting. Floodplain harvesting in the upper Murray Darling catchment is already taking water that would otherwise go to water courses, wetlands, lakes, rivers, the environment and downstream communities, including significant numbers of Indigenous owners. The proposal to legalise and license it is short sighted and will damage ecology, culture and farming all down the rest of the Murray Darling.

The Murray–Darling Basin is of incredible environmental, cultural and economic value to Australia. It's home to sixteen internationally significant wetlands, supporting thirty five endangered species and ninety eight different species of waterbirds. It supports more than 2.2 million people, including people from forty different First Nations. The Basin attracts visitors from around the world, with tourism earning around \$8 billion each year. Around 40% of Australia's agricultural produce comes from the Basin, including 100% of our rice, 80% of our grapes and 28% of our dairy. (MDBA <https://www.mdba.gov.au/importance-murray-darling-basin> )

After the horrendous drought, destroying environment and farms and culminating in the fish kill in the lower Darling in 2019, I can't imagine why Parliament would even consider legalising floodplain harvesting.

Farmers work down the length of the Murray Darling, throughout NSW and into SA, and it is utterly unjust and undemocratic to grant one section of the NSW farming community upstream more water than anyone else along the length of this complex and mighty river system.

Australia is the driest, hottest continent on earth. We are experiencing the effects of global warming already. The entire annual flow of the Murray Darling river system is plentiful but it is not limitless, and rainfall across the country is reducing. For decades now the South Australian end of the Murray has been struggling to survive shrinking water flows due to increasing water takes upstream.

Water is Life.

There has been an alarming increase in the number of private water storages on farms in the North East Basin since 1988, all apparently flying under government authorities' radar. So far approximately 1800

informal private water storages have been built since then, and yet the government has been quiet on the subject. It took whistle blower Marianne Slattery, who had worked for the MDBA, to reveal the facts to the public.

Having turned a blind eye for decades, members of the NSW government are now proposing to grant legitimacy to theft by issuing licenses and regulating the non-approved dams, opening the way for even bigger water take up to be legalised.

The recent drying up of the Menindee Lakes and the Darling wasn't just the result of global warming and regular droughts. The increasing water grab up in the North East has, without a doubt, affected the drying trend in the South West Basin, which has seen agriculturalists, towns, the environment and Indigenous owners suffering periods of extreme water restriction, causing the death of some ecosystems and some farming businesses and literally causing the deaths of Indigenous owners and farmers through suicide. With the demise of the Darling, Indigenous life expectancy in Wilcannia (directly linked to the welfare of the River) is now an average 38 years ... a national disgrace.

We need to listen to the wisdom of Indigenous owners who have successfully managed this river system for thousands of years.

Every farmer, every indigenous owner, every tree, animal and fish along the river desperately needs a guaranteed fair flow of water or we risk turning a large part of our country into a desert. Desertification is on the cards, with the drying and shrinking of the RAMSAR listed Macquarie Marshes ... and the Menindee Lakes system, both of which act as the 'lungs' of the Darling River. These huge water systems filter out contaminants and act as a breeding ground for our unique and threatened native fish species and native bird life. The severely reduced water flow for years in these regions is the real cause of the the drying up of the Marshes, Lakes and the lower Darling, which ended in the disgraceful fish kill of 2019.

There's no point in quibbling over exactly what a fair flow might have been and trying to finesse the figures. Clearly the total death of a mighty river that once supported paddle steamer traffic from Wentworth to Wilcannia, shows that the flow in the South West is nowhere near fair

and equitable. Floodplain harvesting along the river will only worsen the situation.

And the fact that water from the Murray River now has to be piped three hundred kilometres upstream to provide town water for Broken Hill is another demonstration of the appalling mismanagement of this entire river system by government authorities, who have decided to take from downstream to support the mining industry because there already isn't enough water in the system to sustain existing communities even during good flows. If there isn't enough water to support towns, why are further take ups even being discussed?

Water Trading:

I further object to licensing and legalisation of floodplain harvesting because that will play into the hands of water profiteers and will deny the individual a primary right to a resource that none of us can live without. We can't drink money.

Water trading, which was originally designed to save water by putting a price on it, has quickly moved into the hands of commodity traders and big business. I object to the fact that the government, instead of trying to control it in the interests of the wider community, is contemplating legalising and expanding it ... forgetting that water is essential to life itself.

It has been proposed that, once floodplain harvesting is legalised, even bigger allocations than their annual allowance will be allowed to farmers in the north east during very big floods. These extra big flows have supported the entire length of the river system for thousands of years. They are needed to keep massive ecosystems, cultural practises and rural properties alive.

Water prices go through the roof during drought. It's obvious that if the wealthier land owners can afford to build bigger dams and hoard water at the top of the system, they will be able to wait till a drought season and sell at a huge profit.

Australia has always prided itself on being an egalitarian society. The proposed system will create a unique temptation for those at the top and a very unequal playing field, for no justifiable reason.

Trading is already resulting in individuals and small businesses being driven out of the market. Water itself is now often worth more than the land that it flows through. Dairy farmers, grape and citrus growers and smaller agricultural enterprises further down the river have learnt this to their cost. Many have sold up and quit the land after generations of farming.

Legalising floodplain harvesting will only exacerbate this inequitable trend, and will further worsen the scarcity of water, as the giant agribusinesses that supplant the small farmers are putting in even thirstier crops such as almonds.

An economic system needs to support not only the banks and big business, but it needs to serve social, cultural and environmental values.

Conclusion:

Without water we have nothing. We can't drink money.

Both Federal and State governments and the Murray Darling Basin Authority have made a complete hash of the water buyback scheme, and the irrigation system as a whole is suffering already. The MDBA has been proven to be a corrupt, toothless tiger.

The regions concerned are vast, and monitoring water uptake has already been patchy to non-existent. Even on legally irrigated areas along the river system, there has been corruption and water theft, undetected by the authorities whose job it was to prevent them, and inadequately penalised once it was discovered.

The NSW government and water authorities are not fit and proper bodies to control the licensing and legalisation of anything to do with water, as their primary goal is the welfare of a few. It's a profit grab being driven by the National Party, with no consideration for the welfare of the Basin and the state as a whole.

Floodplain harvesting regulations previously proposed were rejected by NSW Parliament twice for very good reason. They would destroy water-dependent wildlife, ecosystems, farms and the economy of downstream communities. Floodplain harvesting must not be licensed or legalised.

“Floodplain harvesting is killing our rivers. It needs to be reined in, not given a blanket exemption.” (*Nature Conservation Council*)

Here is a video on water trading which I’m submitting to support my objection.

<https://vimeo.com/380248772>

Password: MAGNETO

Thanks for considering my submission.

Penny Auburn