

INQUIRY INTO FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 13 August 2021

Partially
Confidential

SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO FLOOD PLAIN HARVESTING

Introduction

My central submission is that floodplain harvesting should not be permitted until its context is addressed, including the history of mismanagement, corruption and regulation failure in the Murray Darling Basin.

If there is ever to be a suitable time to consider legalizing floodplain harvesting I believe it should only be at the end of a process of putting in place strong regulations to protect the Murray Darling Basin.

The IPCC report and Red Alert this week calling for urgent action on climate change and stating clearly the consequences for Australia of insufficient action is another important context for this inquiry.

For the time being I support an embargo on floodplain harvesting until there is a system of basin regulation with effective policing in place that protects the rivers, the environment and the priority needs of the people of Australia.

At the heart of the Basin's problems is chronic over-extraction of water and the fact that this deprives communities and the environment not just in the southern basin but elsewhere as well.

Now is the time to plan to let the rivers flow as we prepare for more frequent and more intense droughts as a result of global warming.

We can be very thankful for this wet year and at the same time remember that for most of the last 20 years we've been in droughts, two of them very long and extreme. So now is the time to be keeping more water in the rivers, not allowing more to be taken out.

Recent regulation changes proposed by the NSW government

I am very grateful that the NSW Legislative Council has repeatedly blocked the government's plans for massive giveaways to big irrigators at the expense of the environment and communities in the southern basin. The regulation changes proposed in April this year would have had tragic consequences for our water resources and the ecosystems that rely on them. Particularly tragic would have been the impacts on communities in the Far West who have already suffered so much in the most recent drought.

Legal issues

The laws covering water in Commonwealth and state laws are beyond the reach of people like myself who don't have specialist legal knowledge.

I would venture that in spite of the widespread opinion amongst people with legal expertise that floodplain harvesting is illegal it has been permitted and facilitated by the NSW government. Big irrigators have constructed major infrastructure in order to rob the rivers and the environment, and the government has persisted in attempts to legalize these projects and to give more water away to the corporate owners.

Failure to put in place regulations and independent and well-resourced enforcement agencies has led to the tragedies we've seen on the rivers with communities left without drinkable water and massive numbers of fish and other species killed during the most recent drought.

Moving forward

1. I am deeply saddened by the government's failure to listen to the First Nations custodians of the basin and to learn from their specialist knowledge. I hope the opportunities to do so are still available to us, and those in power will listen. With the benefit of an understanding of the traditional custodians' cultural values of water, rivers and the environment we could protect their rights and needs and at the same time protect us all and the national interest. For me this is not an optional extra to finding solutions to the problems that have plagued the rivers – it must be central.
2. We need to know more about who owns our water, and how much is being used and where. The public has a right to know what is happening with our most precious resource.
3. The problems arising from turning our water into a commodity for trade and sold to the highest bidders regardless of the national interest are serious ones for the nation. The inequities need to be addressed through changes to regulations in a way that protects sustainable farming methods, food and other products that we and other countries depend on. Being at the mercy of investors not engaged in agriculture but having a vested interest in water shortages is not in the national interest.
4. We need well-resourced and independent regulators at both state and commonwealth levels. The passage of the amendment to the Water Act 2007 (Cth) could be the beginning of such a system, providing the Inspector General is established in an independent office of water compliance rather than being part of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.

I wish the committee and its work well. You have an important opportunity to bring together the evidence and strategies of scientific experts and landholders to make a case for the Murray Darling Basin Plan to bring back the health of the whole river system, as it was originally planned to do.