

**Submission
No 286**

INQUIRY INTO FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING

Name: Mr Andrew Knop

Date Received: 3 September 2021

Submission to the Inquiry into Floodplain Harvesting

Introduction

I have lived in the Central West region of NSW since the 1970's. Since 1992 I have had a strong involvement in regional Landcare activities supporting many local groups as an on-ground volunteer with activities such native plant seed collection, tree planting and wetland rehabilitation projects.

For 15 years I was a Senior Catchment Management Officer with the Central West Catchment Management Authority before leaving to pursue biodiversity and cultural heritage project interests on our properties at Narromine and Dubbo. These projects enabled me to develop extensive experience in the management and reinstatement of natural water flows in upper catchment and flood plain landscapes.

I submit the following comments and issues under the listed terms of reference.

1. (a) the legality of floodplain harvesting practices; (c) how floodplain harvesting can be licensed, regulated, metered and monitored so that it is sustainable and meets the objectives of the Water Management Act 2000 and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan

As the name directly implies, floodplains are landscapes subject to flooding. The flooding is typically intermittent and highly variable, but it is essential to the ecological function and primary production capacity of these landscapes, farms and ecosystems.

Floodplain harvesting is a landscape anomaly which diverts large volumes of flood water from the rivers and flood plains into large storages. In every circumstance this diversion is removing a fundamental resource from all downstream floodplain landscapes for the sole benefit of the harvester. Water is often pumped onto elevated ground so it can be gravity fed via channels. These storages and channels are prone to leakage and very high evaporation rates. The implications of allowing this are massive from a landscape management and social equity issue. For the committee's consideration these issues are briefly explored below:

- 1.1. Social equity – individuals who established farms containing floodplain landscapes did so because of the unique agricultural benefits the floodplains provide, typically, fertile soils, abundant plant growth and access to natural water flows. Intermittent floodplain flows replenish nutrients, organic matter and soils. Plant growth is prolific in healthy floodplain environments. This is historically reflected in the value of farmland containing floodplain soils and landscapes. People paid a high price to secure these properties.

Any floodplain harvesting has direct impact on every farm, wetland and nature reserve downstream. Diversion of floodplain waters reduce the depth and extent of flood waters and ultimately reduces the vital hydrological benefits they provide to these landscapes. It also reduces the primary production and capital value of the land. In essence floodplain harvesting removes the unique and vital resource that defines the floodplain, effectively starving downstream farms and ecosystems for the benefit of some newly arrived, exploitative operation.

I noted in March of this year politicians making media comment regarding 'floodplain harvesting being needed to reduce damage to vital farm infrastructure'. As a landholder with the additional experience of visiting many hundreds of properties in a professional capacity I challenge this claim. In a nutshell, rural landholders do not build vital infrastructure in flow lines and flood prone areas. Fences, roads, water supply installations are exposed to flood risk, they are not vital and they can be replaced or repaired (pumps are readily moved). These statements, made by individuals elected to represent the entire community, appear to be loaded by vested interest. I would like to see these claims investigated.

1. What "emergency" situation did floodplain harvesting supposedly solve?
2. How and where was the diversion carried out and what volumes of water were involved?
3. How were downstream landholders and communities consulted regarding losing vital floodplain flows to an undisclosed "emergency" mitigation scenario?
4. What compensation or 'make good' arrangements have been implemented since the harvest event?

Related to this issue I was also very surprised to hear the completely unsubstantiated and misleading claims made by the NSW Irrigators Council CEO in the Friendlyjardies story, 'Blood Water'. In the story NSW Irrigators used the Gwydir floods in March this year as an example of a flood that could have been managed by floodplain harvesting. The Irrigators did not disclose that the Gwydir is a regulated river or say how harvesting could have mitigated the flood.

The reality for Moree was the Copeton dam and all upstream farm dam storages were full and overflowing. Somehow NSW Irrigators believe a floodplain harvesting saviour could have safely removed and stored tens of thousands of megalitres of water to alleviate Moree from the flood. Given the many worldwide catastrophic experiences with poorly designed and implemented dam storages I would be more worried about some unapproved storage attempting to hold thousands of megalitres of water over a flood event. Just where and how could floodplain harvesting store and then safely release this water? This is a baffling and very misleading claim by the NSW Irrigators Council.

The NSW Irrigators CEO also stated, *"The reason there are so many on farm storages in those northern valleys is because they don't have the great big public storages to catch the water and hold it and then distribute it out to everybody that they have down in the southern basin"*. So the eight public storages - Burrendong, Windamere, Keepit, Copeton, Split Rock, Pindarri, Chaffey and Glenyon dams plus the numerous river weirs located on all the major rivers above Brewarrina - don't exist? These public works storages do exist and they *"catch the water and hold it and then distribute it"* for benefit of northern valley users, communities and flood mitigation purposes. They can hold over 5,000 gegalitres of water.

The practical reality is the northern basin has many public water storages at locations where it is practical, cost effective and safe to do so. The floodplain landscapes downstream are too flat to store large expanses of water. Evaporation will quickly turn any storage into a salt pan. NSW Irrigators seem to think it is ethical to openly mislead the community and politicians with outlandish statements and claims. It is high time vested interest groups are called to account when found to be presenting misleading comment which suits their pecuniary interest. I submit their testimony is tainted and should be treated as such.

Recommendation:

- Floodplain harvesting be immediately halted and the downstream financial and environmental impacts thoroughly investigated.
- The above mentioned political and misleading claims be investigated; and
- Downstream landholders, including environmental interest, be provided veto rights to stop floodplain harvesting unless genuine "emergency" situations arise where a harvest event is transparently evaluated as valid solution.

- 1.2. Environmental implication – The NSW community has a situation where privileged groups have been given carte blanche to exploit a dwindling water resource to the detriment of downstream users, landscapes and environments. These privileged groups have built storages structures which will expose this precious and dwindling resource to extreme evaporation and leakage conditions leading to secondary environmental damage through salinity and acidification. They have not disclosed these risks or any plans which will manage and ameliorate these inevitable and very serious legacy issues. Additionally, they do not disclose information regarding their farming practices which are degrading soil structure, depleting organic matter and spreading chemicals over our landscapes and water ways (ie. herbicides, defoliants, pesticides, fungicides).

Given our nation is facing unprecedented biodiversity loss and global warming implications it is time our community seized the day to reduce the burden placed on future generations. The precautionary principle should be applied.

The only feasible recommendation is for a complete halt to the floodplain harvesting practice along with environmental testing of the harvesting properties for salinity and chemical run off issues.

I thank the committee for undertaking this important inquiry and their consideration of the issues raised above.

Your sincerely
Andrew Knop
Narromine