

INQUIRY INTO FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING

Organisation: Tolarno Station 1851 Pty Ltd

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Ms Cate Faehrmann Chair
Select Committee on Floodplain Harvesting
NSW Legislative Council

Submission to the NSW Select Committee on Floodplain Harvesting

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry investigating the legality of floodplain harvesting. As my contribution to this inquiry, I would like to share my story of the impact that greed and corruption in water policy and in particular floodplain harvesting practices have had on me as an individual.

I'm a fourth generation Australian with a proud family history in agriculture. I own three properties totalling 500,000 acres on the Lower Darling, approximately 50 km south of the Menindee Lakes. The current rate of water extraction in the Lower Darling is immoral and should be illegal, for destroying an ancient river system. Over the past 10 years, declining water quality and availability has had a profound impact on my business, my relationships, and my mental health. I hope that by sharing my personal story I can demonstrate the devastating impact of floodplain harvesting on people's lives and livelihood.

Background

The Lower Darling, a 500km stretch of river which includes the Menindee Lakes, is integral to the social, cultural, and economic livelihood of the communities of Menindee, Pooncarie, Ellerslie, and Wentworth. It is the traditional lands of the Barkindji Nation, who have continued connection to the river and country. We're proud to walk beside First Nations and respect them in every way.

Tolarno Station sits on the Darling River, and all three properties depend on the Darling for livestock and domestic purposes. The properties have a rich history spanning 160 years, and today run merino sheep and rangeland goats.

The Lower Darling is a profitable agricultural community with predominantly pastoral and cropping production. Until recently there was a strong citrus production industry,

which has suffered due to substantial reduction in the region's water availability and quality. The rich agricultural history of the area date back to the 1820s. The industry requires a healthy, sustainable river system for economic viability. Properties depend on pumping small quantities of water for stock and domestic purposes or crops, either directly from the river or from groundwater replenished by the river.

Floodplain harvesting occurs in the tributaries of the Lower Darling. Water taken upstream is water that cannot travel through our river system, into the Menindee Lakes and down to South Australia. The expansion of floodplain harvesting is responsible for the man-made disaster that is the destruction of the Darling River, and it must be illegal.

My Story

I was raised a man that believed if you worked hard and did the right thing by people that you had a future. Given my family's history in agriculture, I thought I had a bright future in farming. Water theft and over-extraction in the north changed my business, killing my stock and destroying the river flows and access to clean water.

Over the past 10 years, the financial impact of declining water quality and availability has been severe. As the reports show, we were running 26,000 head of sheep before things changed massively on the river system. Greed and corruption became the norm and accepted practice by the National Party-led coalition, both state and federally. My stock numbers plummeted to 9,000 as the results of dying river system. A loss of 15,000 sheep has cost somewhere in the order of \$6 million over the 10-year period in lost income and economic activity. The 9,000 sheep we have are now subject to very low lambing rates, very high death rates and low cut of wool per head (reducing income by a further 20%).

I attribute this loss of livestock to the fact that the water was either not in the river or it was of deplorable, disgusting quality. We have a water licence for stock and domestic purposes, but the water was so putrid that I saw sheep walk away from the troughs. They chose to die rather than drink the water that I could provide them. Words can't describe how it makes me feel to see my sheep suffer because I can't provide them with safe water. Water of this quality would make someone in any country ashamed, but as a proud Australian witnessing this destruction of one of the greatest rivers in this country, it has been heart breaking.

Year after year, water is stolen upstream through illegal floodplain harvesting. My business was made unprofitable as a result of killing the river system. It's a miracle that we are still going, given we have been denied the basic right to water that we need to survive. If not for goating (capturing and selling wild goats) and cutting back on general maintenance such as improving fences or upgrading equipment, we

might not be here. This is a very sad reality, as with 500,000 acres we are one of the largest land holders in the history of NSW and we should be doing very, very well.

It's also had an impact on the value of our land. I estimate my property value has taken a hit by as much as \$55 million. As an example, I give you Mourner Station on the Murray, where an acre of land is going for about \$171. Conversely, we are going for somewhere in the vicinity of \$61.00 per acre. I took risks, I expanded our operation buying some of the land in our region to keep it in Aussie hands. I am proud of my achievements in doubling the size of the station's holdings to 500,000 acres.

Floodplain harvesting has been allowed to expand across the Northern Basin at the expense of the people and rivers downstream. Vast amounts of water have been stolen from towns like Wilcannia and Menindee with devastating consequences. Politicians have a responsibility to the people, but many have turned a blind eye. Others have enabled the corruption and destruction of our rivers. Floodplain harvesting was meant to be capped with all other extractions in the 90s. We need a record of all politicians since John Howard took the water off the land to create the water market. The public needs to know who in public office have directly benefited from floodplain harvesting and establish all conflicts of interest that not only allowed floodplain harvesting to continue but to expand.

I gave evidence to the South Australian Royal Commission that threatened me outside a meeting of the Ministerial Council for Governments of the Murray Darling Basin (MinCo), and I have made police reports about other threatening behaviour that was never investigated. I would be happy to expand in detail to the committee with the benefit of parliamentary privilege. These actions, combined with witnessing the destruction of a river system, have built up mental stress that is beyond comprehension. The lack of integrity and respect is totally unacceptable. We need clarity on the legality of floodplain harvesting, and any licences issued into the future must rein floodplain harvesting back to levels that a river system can support.

I always say that the death of the Darling River has nothing to do with drought, it has everything to do with the greed and corruption in the Northern Basin. Floodplain harvesting has a huge impact on the amount of water coming downstream. The Productivity Commission said that the Lower Darling entered a hydrological drought three years before the natural drought began. Water held upstream created drought conditions that made our area even more fragile and extended the duration of the dry period, resulting in the man-made disaster of the 2019 Menindee Fish Kills.

Millions of people around the world were outraged by the video of the 2019 Menindee fish kill. I was one of the dead fish guys that went viral on the Tolarno Station Facebook Page. 16 million people from across the world saw that video and connected to the needless destruction of the Darling River and the deaths of millions

of fish. The smell of dead fish and the devastation around us will be imprinted on my heart and my soul forever.

As a proud Australian I have done my utmost to be a good father and husband, but it's taken a toll on me and on my relationships. I am a proud father of three beautiful children, but I am a changed man after watching the needless destruction of the river system around me. My youngest son is just two years old, and I hate to imagine what our station will look like when he is old enough to work there. I have invested my life in agriculture, sharing my knowledge with the next generation and fighting to save this river system. It breaks my heart to imagine the happy, peaceful lives we could lead if we were not all-consumed by fighting the greed and corruption that has destroyed our land, our stock, and our livelihoods.

Ladies and gentlemen of the select committee into floodplain harvesting, please understand how important this inquiry is to me and my family. From the bottom of my heart I would like to thank you for undertaking this investigation. The greed and corruption must stop. This inquiry is of great importance to far-western NSW communities.

I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to share my story and make a submission to this inquiry. I would be happy to expand further any of our above comments.

Kind regards,

Robert McBride

Tolarno, Peppora and Wyoming Stations

