

**REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON STATE DEVELOPMENT**

**INQUIRY INTO ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN  
CENTRAL WESTERN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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**At Parkes on 3 November 2011**

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**The Committee met at 1.30 p.m.**

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**PRESENT**

The Hon. R. H. Colless (Chair)

The Hon. P. Green  
The Hon. S. MacDonald  
The Hon. Dr P. R. Phelps  
The Hon. M. S. Veitch  
The Hon. S. J. R. Whan

**GEOFFREY ALLAN WISE**, General Manager, Bourke Shire Council,

**ANDREW LEWIS**, Mayor, Bourke Shire Council, and

**BELINDA GWYN BARLOW**, Executive Officer, Orana Regional Organisation of Councils, sworn and examined:

**RICARDO WARREN**, General Manager, Coonamble Shire Council, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee today?

**Mr WISE:** I am representing the Orana Regional Organisation of Councils.

**CHAIR:** Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

**Mr WISE:** I have some vague idea about them, yes.

**Mr LEWIS:** I am aware of them, yes.

**Ms BARLOW:** Yes.

**Mr WARREN:** I am, yes.

**CHAIR:** If you consider at any stage that there is any evidence or documentation that you would prefer to be heard or viewed only by the Committee, please indicate that and we will consider that request. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

**Mr LEWIS:** I thank the Committee for the chance to present to you. We are representing our own council as well as the Orana Regional Organisation of Councils [OROC]. I will not be doing much talking; Mr Wise and Ms Barlow will be doing most discussions today. It is great that you have been able to come out to the bush and take interest in it.

**Mr WISE:** From a personal point of view, I have always seen State development as an absolute crucial thing. I have been privileged over the years—I spent about six years on the Orana Regional Development Board back in the late 1990s. I also spent a period of time on the area consultative committee, the forerunner to Regional Development Australia. I was the chair of the area consultative committee, and I was offered the job of deputy chair of OROC. I chose to concentrate on issues pertinent to Bourke. I imagine we will touch on a diversity of issues and I welcome the challenge of some of them.

**CHAIR:** Ms Barlow, is there anything you would like to add?

**Ms BARLOW:** No.

**CHAIR:** Mr Warren, would you like to make a short opening statement?

**Mr WARREN:** I take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me to be a witness. My apologies for my mayor, who is ill and unable to attend. Certainly, within our region, it is an area that has substantial issues. We hope something will come from this that may be able to address those issues.

**The Hon. PAUL GREEN:** Your submission notes that while some communities in the region have experienced growth, "the majority of OROC's communities have declined in population and withdrawn under the social and financial strain after nine years of drought and the subsequent sustainability challenges and uncertainties". What is the impact of this two-tiered growth and what challenges does it present in delivering community services to communities?

**Mr WISE:** My view of the impacts of population growth, especially speaking from a Bourke perspective and putting it into perspective, for the national census period between 2001 and 2006 Bourke had the third highest percentage population decrease of any shire in Australia. Two shires in remote areas of Western Australia had bigger percentage decreases. My personal view of the three reasons, the way I sum up,

three reasons have had the biggest cause there. One was the extended drought that went on for the best part of a decade but a lot of other places in Australia had a similar extended drought. The second one was the indecision and uncertainty that went on for roughly the same decade over water policy, and that indecision is still going on. I was at a meeting yesterday about a draft water sharing plan for the Barwon-Darling River, still with great areas of indecision.

Quite frankly I believe the lack of decision making, and therefore people directly involved in the irrigation industry in particular not knowing what they were dealing with, probably had an even greater impact than the ultimate decisions that have trickled out, even when they had in very rough terms a 6 per cent to 7 per cent cut in their water entitlement. The indecision, in my view, was probably more impacting than the ultimate decisions. The third reason—just an overall capture of it—that I put down that impacted, I simply say people's loss of confidence. That can be a whole range of things. It is confidence of whether their kids will get a job when they leave school. They want confidence that we will still have a health system or a transport system or whether there is confidence in my old age that I could be cared for in a more remote area, especially if the elderly look towards those who are the working generation. They might have left town to get a job somewhere else, so the elderly feel isolated. Just as an overall broad issue, confidence in how the social welfare is going in the town.

That is what I put it down to. There is no doubt there is a lot of centralisation of issues, especially in Commonwealth and State government services. The populations have reduced significantly in some of those smaller towns. Even in a town like Dubbo—I was in Dubbo during the growth era in the 1980s where virtually every business had a regional headquarters in Dubbo. Whether it was the banks, the insurance companies, the stock and station agents or Commonwealth and State government departments, every one of them had a regional headquarters in Dubbo. To a large extent that layer of management has been taken out of all business structures. So they left. I actually started an organisation in Dubbo in the early 1990s. I think it was called the Dubbo managers' forum, where managers from the public, private and commercial sectors met on a monthly basis for a short snappy thing because managers all had something in common and where we came from. It is still going. It has been going now for about 18 years on a monthly basis, though it did have a gap for a couple of years in the middle. But it has totally changed because that sort of structure has gone out of regional Australia. So there are a number of issues. I will jump from what is a small town example to a regional example

**The Hon. PAUL GREEN:** Do you think it is going to change? Do you think it will grow back or do you think it has slipped away and it is gone, or going?

**Mr WISE:** At the regional management type level, that is business and that is not going to change. As far as the smaller community issues, not every small community is going to stay the same size. Certainly we anticipate that the population slide that occurred in Bourke during the early 2000s has stopped. We are waiting to hear the official census figures but we believe it has plateaued. Certainly there will be some movement back in. In the paper which you have been given I think Ms Barlow has referred to the number of agronomists that were in Bourke back when things were humming with the irrigation industry.

When people know exactly what their businesses are and how they can manage them with confidence, after the basin plan is finalised, after the water sharing plan is finalised, businesses will make their own decisions about what personnel they need locally as distinct from that being done at a distance. Certainly the rate of change of technology and the internet and that sort of provision of information and detail, that is probably the greatest pace of change of everything that we all have to work with and live with and capitalise on, which really means it is so crucial for every community, no matter how remote, to have that whole information technology facility at the best possible level.

**The Hon. STEVE WHAN:** Your submission talks in part about the different boundaries for different consideration for regional areas. Can you talk to us a bit about how that affects service delivery, particularly from State government services to the region? Also, other people who have been here previously have mentioned the difficulties with services that are provided into a town and then out again without consistency of those services being provided. Have you got any comments on that?

**Mr WISE:** I will have first go, but I hope everyone else chips in. From my personal experience, and I guess I should share that I was a New South Wales government public servant for 40 years initially in the Department of Agriculture and subsequently in natural resources by a few different names, and I was also the Western Lands Commissioner simultaneously with that role, so I take the attitude that I have developed a fairly big network and worked out how to work across boundaries anyway and not let boundaries be a barrier. I think

the majority of towns are like that at any level now, especially for the west. We tend to work together on a needs basis.

If I can use a specific example, Mr Lewis and I have been at a meeting this morning of an alliance of seven councils tied up with management of local government water and sewerage. It is called the Lower Macquarie Water Utilities Alliance. Wellington is one of those seven councils and yet Wellington is not in the Orana Regional Organisation of Councils. They are sitting right on the boundary; they had a choice. They used to be in the Orana region and also the Central West. They have chosen to go to the Central West for the Regional Organisation of Councils, but they have chosen to go to the Macquarie, because of the very nature of the Macquarie River, for water and sewerage. It might sound strange but it is really not a problem. That is a horses for courses and you just have to work accordingly. If we were ever aiming as a national organisation to do away with State governments and only have Commonwealth government and regional governments, suddenly it would become a problem because obviously regional boundaries have become so much more prescribed. But I think we are a long way away from that at this stage.

**The Hon. STEVE WHAN:** I suspect so. Can I ask you about Aboriginal population growth in your communities and your thoughts about engaging the young Aboriginal population particularly in education and training and then into the workforce. Do any of you have any particular comments in that area? I know from many of your communities in your area that is the growth area of population.

**Mr LEWIS:** Certainly the Aboriginal population is growing in western towns. They are staying there; a lot of the other people are leaving towns. A lot of that is to do with social cohesion. The higher the Aboriginal population seems to get they are having an increase in law and order problems, so the rate is probably increasing more than which you normally think it would. A lot of them do not have work and there is no opportunity for work so the rate of the rise and how we go about addressing that is certainly a big issue. Mr Wise can talk further about it but it is certainly a big issue, the increase in rates and whether we can get the Aboriginal population into the workforce and certainly helping the whole workforce.

**The Hon. STEVE WHAN:** Are you seeing any good examples of people who have managed to engage in community and education that should be used elsewhere?

**Mr WISE:** If I do not answer that please come back to me on it. Just adding one little bit to what Mr Lewis has just said, we all need to acknowledge that it is a fact of life, if you like, that Aboriginal people are tied to their country. It is more important to a lot of them to stay where they are irrespective of work, education, health, whatever. So from a policy perspective of the Commonwealth government, State government and the regional government, we either have to acknowledge that and so therefore we have got to do things differently in those communities, or else we have got to say we are not going to tolerate that any more. If I cannot get a job as a general manager in Bourke I cannot expect to stay at Bourke and get a job as a lion tamer but expect to be earning the same income. We have to either acknowledge their culture and the way they are tied to their country and tailor things accordingly.

That then brings into play a whole host of other things. Education, for instance, if we acknowledge that there are dysfunctional families which creates dysfunctional kids, the chances are the members of the family have no education themselves, so we are dealing with kids with no home peer support for education. A typical school classroom training ground might not be the best place for them. They might be better given a choice of there or some other training area, as an example.

I understand there is an interesting program in Western Australia, the Clontarf program, that is currently being looked at. I would certainly welcome that, without knowing any personal details about it. I have taken note of the Ombudsman's recent October report. I think it is called "Addressing Aboriginal disadvantage: the need to do things differently". I have got a copy in my bag. I totally endorse that. Our council in fact only a month before that came out was taking action to say we have got to do things differently with Aboriginal people. If one of the things done differently is introducing a trial of something like the Clontarf program it is worth the effort.

I have formed the view, having read that document, that I am very strongly of the view that once the Indigenous population gets above a certain percentage in a community, and I have no idea what that percentage is but it is probably about 20 per cent—once it gets above that percentage you have got a disadvantaged community because the interaction between the Indigenous issues and the non-Indigenous issues become so entwined and so significant that I think it is realistic to be referring to any community above some threshold as

being a disadvantaged community. I put to you that that threshold is probably about 20 per cent. In those communities then we have got to trial things. More of the same is not going to address the issues, whether it is education, whether it is law and order.

Another one that Bourke has been pushing for a decade is having a socioeconomic zone trial. When I say Bourke has been pushing it, five councils formed what is called the Barwon Darling Alliance back in the late 1990s. They were fundamentally the river towns from Coonamble, Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke and Central Darling. Of all the projects that were recommended out of that, one was an economic zone trial where we put ourselves out there and say let us manage money, manage employment, manage social welfare differently based on overseas models just to see if that can help. That is probably more in the employment side rather than the education side. Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly was a partner with those five councils.

**The Hon. STEVE WHAN:** What has happened out of that so far?

**Mr WISE:** I guess we were predominantly targeting the Federal government because we were talking about social welfare payments being distributed differently. We were getting nowhere with the previous Federal Government so we waited until there was a change and Labor came into power. We thought we were getting some traction with them. We got as far as seeing Minister Gillard before she was Prime Minister. When I say we, in particular it was Sam Jeffries who is the chair of Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, so he was carrying it from the Aboriginal point of view. We got nowhere. It was just all too hard, did not want to know about it. We have dissolved the Barwon Darling Alliance because we thought if we are getting nowhere there is no point in going any further. But we only made that decision to dissolve it at this year's annual shires conference in Sydney.

**Mr WARREN:** Leading on from what Mr Wise said in relation to the youth issues, in Coonamble in particular we are finding that the policy of attending school until you are 17—the high school Indigenous participation rate there is about 70 per cent. What we are finding is that there is more of a need to engage the higher level kids, the 15, 16, 17 year olds. We need to engage them more in work ready activities, trying to get them into the workforce. We are just finding that book learning, schoolroom learning is not going to prepare them to enter the workforce. As Mr Wise said, they are tied to their area. Specifically our council and the schools and education department are looking at alternate learning centres or alternate learning arrangements for those people with a view of getting away from "we are engaging them" to "we are going to be able to make these people work ready". Certainly we believe education is key, but not education for education's sake, and also to be able to make them work ready. As a community I think we have accepted we need to lift our game and pick up our act in that and take steps towards making youth employment opportunities available.

**The Hon. MICK VEITCH:** There are a couple of things I would like to explore with you but in the time I have probably the main one would be about that initiative of Evocities and how you see it. For instance, at Coonamble is it an issue that actually assists Coonamble in any way, or is it having any impact?

**Mr WARREN:** I do not believe there has been any great outcome from our point of view where we are. Certainly there are things we looked at like progressing regional towns and those sorts of things, we have looked at those. But, again, they can be capital intensive and we are finding that it is just not happening.

**Mr WISE:** Certainly from a Bourke point of view, that far out there is no obvious impact at all. If I can just talk from a different personal perspective, I have to say in Tamworth there is a dentist and he is just in the process of building a new, very expensive dental surgery. The planning rules in regard to parking were extremely expensive and constraining and are going to achieve nothing. Yet he is building what he is building on the assumption—or he is backing himself—that he will bring at least two new dentists into Tamworth. The only place they will come from will be the city.

He will bring a dental hygienist and probably a therapist as well. So his business will probably achieve as much in a matter of two or three years as a lot of hyper expense about an Evocity type approach. It is ironical that he has got to pay a fortune to the Tamworth City Council to satisfy a planning rule. In a parking building parking is not an issue, but he has got to have so many car parks in the backyard. I guess I am trying to show that that is great for the regional centres, who can afford it, to go into Evocity type models, but we have got to acknowledge what private enterprise can achieve equally and probably even easier, if they do not have constraints that are just one size fits all types of constraints.

**The Hon. MICK VEITCH:** We have raised the issue of population modelling and how government departments—planning or health—will use population modelling for service delivery. Often it is not accurate or it is dated. Do you have any comments around that?

**Ms BARLOW:** The two general managers are probably best able to answer that question.

**Mr WARREN:** Population modelling is not often reflective of the issues that pertain to a remote community. That is what we are finding out. There are probably more resources required per head of population than on average. If you want to take an average cost, particularly in law and order, we find that if you use population modelling the number of police that would be available probably is not sufficient. With the police again there are always some not available, not on duty. So once you bring that back your police numbers are reduced fairly much. If you look at population modelling in relation to the social issues being experienced in these areas, even the community services that are available are completely insufficient to deal with the problems of that population centre. That is certainly one issue. Education is probably not so much of an issue. Community services and policing are issues where we believe there needs to be more emphasis placed on the specific problems of those rural and remote areas, rather than saying, "You have a hundred people there therefore you get one police".

**Mr WISE:** In addition to what Mr Warren said, it is probably one of those necessities that we have to have population modelling, but you have got to look at the big picture. Every two weeks the population of Sydney, for instance, is growing by about the equivalent of the population of Bourke township. In one human gestation period Sydney is growing at the population of Dubbo: Sydney grows by about the Dubbo population in nine months. We need to have that sort of perspective. Population modelling could not predict the decade of drought that we had at the beginning of this century. Population modelling is not very good at picking where the next goldmine is going to be. One of the biggest changes across regional Australia in the last few years has been where the mines have sprung up.

That has created two-tier economies in those towns that has impacted enormously on employment and competition or whatever. You cannot model that in anticipation. But, having said that, one of the things that I have been trying to paint a picture about is the Newell Highway, which is straight outside the window here. The Newell Highway runs from the Queensland border to the Victorian border. Roughly 60 per cent of New South Wales is the other side of the Newell Highway. Excluding any towns and cities on the Newell Highway, of the six biggest communities out there three are mining and three are irrigation communities. But the sixth biggest only has a population of about 3,000. Every other population off the Newell Highway is less than 3,000. They are the sort of numbers we are dealing with once you get to the other side of the street.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Yesterday we had a submission from Regional Development Australia, Orana. They were speaking of a fairly bleak picture. Things are getting better now—you have got better conditions and you have got mining—but outside of Dubbo, the rest of Orana, with the exception of mining, appears to be stagnant or in slow decline. What is the future for non-Dubbo Orana in 20 years time? From what I heard you have got a situation of flight from large numbers of Aboriginal communities. You have got a situation, certainly along the Murray-Darling, where you may well see a green-inspired ratchet of less and less water. Where is Orana going to be in 20 years time, excluding the Dubbo component—Coonamble?

**Mr WARREN:** I probably cannot answer your question but what I would like to say is that we would not like to be a welfare town. I think that probably goes for a lot of those towns out there. We are certainly looking at every opportunity we have to become a winner, so to speak, but I think we need to do it from within. Certainly we need to identify our own opportunities. As Mr Wise said earlier, we need to recognise race with our Indigenous and Aboriginal population and make a future for those people as a full part of our community. Again, I think that is the direction we are taking with our integrated planning and reporting.

We are looking fairly hard at what we can do and planning for the future and for the next 20 years. But we also recognise the fact that the region is stagnant and it is slowly declining. I believe that certain councillors within my shire have accepted that fact and would prefer a slow decline rather than just give up the ghost so to speak. It is a continual trying to make every post a winner, trying to take every economic advantage we can get. We certainly look at tourism as something that is of assistance to us, but from a Coonamble perspective, we are a through town, not a to town really. We need to recognise that fact. We need some infrastructure there to encourage people to come and stay in the town rather than just passing through on to somewhere else.

**Mr LEWIS:** In the next 20 years, if we keep doing the same things, the population will decline. But if we can get less government intervention on some things and more government intervention on other things—less native vegetation, more security of water—that certainly would help people, if they knew what they had to play with. We also need some government intervention on law and order so we get an economic zone up—these sorts of things. If Bourke could get some government assistance to build a goat abattoir so you can get those low-skilled jobs for people who do not have a lot of skills they can look to the future. They can start bringing their kids up with the idea that man has got to work. People out there think they do not have to work, the government will supply all of it. Somebody in the family has got to work to bring an income in so children learn the need to work, the need to go to school. We certainly need less government intervention on some things and a bit more on others.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Just on the less government intervention aspect, you spoke about less native vegetation. What other sorts of things? What does the State Government do that you believe unduly restricts your ability, as a community, to make solid economic advances? Native vegetation is one. What other things does the State Government do that we should not be doing in your view?

**Mr LEWIS:** One of my issues is native vegetation. I have a small gypsum mine and some of the rehabilitation stuff you have got to do—we have just been given a bill. We have got to pay a \$27,000 fee up front as security. All those sorts of things make it difficult to plan for the future and make a profit so you can stay in the region. Mr Wise has probably more ideas on it.

**Mr WISE:** I would simply refer back to where I was yesterday at the meeting with State Government agencies on water. If I go back to 2006 I was sitting beside the then water Minister, on his side of the table, where he held a gun at the head of all the community—the irrigators, the mayors and the group of people in the room. We got them to sign off, which led to a 67 per cent cut in their water rate—not literally.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** A 67 per cent cut?

**Mr WISE:** A 67 per cent reduction in their water entitlements. Fundamentally from a cumulative total of 523 back to 173 gegalitres of water. They signed off on a memorandum of agreement. There were a whole heap of things that the Government was going to do to offset that. The people around the room yesterday were saying "Righto, we are here to start talking about some of those things". The reduction was implemented immediately—2006. We were here in the room yesterday at Bourke—Wilcannia today—to start implementing some of those things, the sweeteners, if you like, for the reduction. That is the sort of uncertainty. They were living with uncertainty for the 10 years before 2006 but that ongoing uncertainty has just left them in the lurch. Once that is all signed off and if it is bedded down and left alone people can plan. That is the key. I am not anticipating any great growth in the population west of Dubbo. I am certainly anticipating there is going to be a significant growth in how smart people operate. There are going to be some smart operators out there who survive. My anxiety is that unless we do things differently for the Indigenous population we are going to continue to have a bigger gulf and two-tier communities.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Do you believe that the water buybacks and the water reductions will drive people off the land?

**Mr WISE:** No, that has been done. That has happened. I do not anticipate any further reduction in the population as a result of that. It is totally different along the Murray. I am not going to speculate on the Murray. That two-thirds cut is what had such a big impact on us, and the build up to it. I do not anticipate any more. One of the things that was debated strongly yesterday, and at Walgett the day before and at Wilcannia today, is that the current watershed plan that the Government has put on the table gives absolutely nothing to the small operator. It is geared to the big operator. If it goes through in its current format—

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** You will drive more people off the land, because consolidation will be required.

**Mr WISE:** I do not think that should be the intention for the government or certainly from a local council point of view. I argued that point pretty strongly yesterday. The only other point I would make is that although I believe there are great opportunities for the Indigenous population—our local member, the Hon. Kevin Humphries, was talking to one of our constituents recently and he made the comment that a million dollars a week goes into Bourke, presumably social welfare related. The local constituency said to us afterwards, "A million dollars a week, \$50 million a year, \$500 million in a decade." Are there smarter ways of spending

\$00 million? So thinking through it, if there is a low-skill employment opportunity, and the mayor mentioned an abattoir, for instance—

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Or mining.

**Mr WISE:** You cannot create mining, that is a problem. If it is there, it is great but you cannot create it. But something like an abattoir—we have been looking for a grant to build an indigenous cultural centre which gives them something they can be proud of, gives them something they can participate in and works tremendously with tourism. Part of our argument is that Bourke is fairly well placed between the hot population area of Australia from Adelaide to the north and Canberra to Sydney to Brisbane. A cultural centre that was education, research and tourism orientated would create employment and it would be an enormous bridge builder between the city populations and the bush. The cost of that would be nothing but the payback would be enormous.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** My question is on water. I tend to agree that water security and certainty is probably the key for it all. What did you mean exactly when you said that the new water sharing plan might advantage the larger operators over the smaller operators?

**Mr WISE:** This is getting into technicalities, but for the past 40 years—

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Do not worry—the Hon. Scot MacDonald is very technical on this.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I am just curious.

**Mr WISE:** For the past 40 years there has been a condition on every water licence along the Barwon-Darling, which is different from the Murray. It is a whole different river system, the way it operates. There has been a simple little clause which says, "Notwithstanding all the conditions on your licence, by mutual agreement between the department and the licence holder, for a certain reason under a certain situation you might be able to take water."

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** So the department can take the water back.

**Mr WISE:** No, sorry, an irrigator might be able to extract some.

**CHAIR:** Over and above their licence agreement.

**Mr WISE:** Irrespective of all the constraint clauses in the licence, this notwithstanding clause says "notwithstanding all of the above"; if you approach the departmental person and there is mutual agreement you might be able to breach the clause. It might be for so many metres or so many days or whatever.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Is that when there is a big flood?

**Mr WISE:** It could be a big flood, it could be no flood. It is fundamentally acknowledged that it is a variable river system. It is an opportune sort of river system. You cannot write a rule for everything so it is a way of getting around the rules. That clause has been operating effectively for 40 years, and the clause is still on every licence. In 2009 there was an administrative decision by someone in the department who simply said to every irrigator, "Don't worry about asking for approval against that clause anymore because the answer will be no." The answer is knocked back. What it means is that unless—

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** —you have the entitlement you will not access it.

**Mr WISE:** No. What it effectively means is that, unless each person with a licence has an off-river water storage so that when the river is flowing above the legal limits they pump into storage and then use it, they will not be able to use their water.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** So that will advantage the big operators with a storage?

**Mr WISE:** It means that someone with very small usage, probably using less than someone who has basic rights because of livestock and domestic use—they might just have half a hectare of tomatoes.



**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** At Menindee or somewhere.

**Mr WISE:** We have someone like this in Bourke at the moment. It is totally uneconomical to build an off-river storage facility that small, and I would argue that it is totally contrary to sound environmental practice because you would have two surface areas evaporating, where these people along the whole length of the river, those small operators running on a weir so it would make no difference to the weir pool but they will have to close it because the river flow is so variable that they could not get the shortest cash crop in and guarantee being able to water it before the river drops.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I will finish with another question on the water sharing plan. Is there anything else in terms of the water sharing plan that you are signing off on that is a barrier? You seem to be implying that there is still a certain amount of uncertainty. Is it a timing thing? Is it taking too long? Are there any other issues in the water sharing plan that you would like to bring to our attention?

**Mr WISE:** I repeat what I said yesterday. Unfortunately Kevin Humphries had left the room when I said it so I will send it to him in writing. Apart from the years that have taken, even now quick decisions on some issues can allow people to plan. A major example is way back when the Minister got everyone to sign this agreement in 2006 part of the agreement was that the figures will be adjusted when new information comes in. That new information was printed in the basic plan, which was tabled in early October last year. So it must have been known early in winter last year. That information, when it is ultimately applied, gives irrigators access to more water than they currently have. It was only yesterday they were saying, "We'll start thinking about implementing this using this new information."

It means the annual cash croppers, the crop growers in particular, lost all of last season and they have lost all of this season in being able to plan on that new information, and the department is still talking about it. That is one example. If it is delayed until next June—the plan is not anticipated to come out until next June—they could well lose next season as well, purely because they just have not got around to it. The second example is this notwithstanding clause, which is just an administrative decision by someone in the department saying, "Don't ask because the answer will be no", even though it is on the licence and there is a right of appeal under the current licence. If that gets reinstated purely by the Minister, the water commissioner or someone saying, "We will honour the way it operated for the past 40 years", some small operators in particular might be able to put in a bit of lucerne in autumn next year. If they wait until the plan comes out in June they have lost another season. So for the sake of an administrative decision on that, even before the plan comes out, it can make the difference of a whole season for someone like that.

**Mr LEWIS:** There is another point that Mr Wise needs to talk about. The dams and rivers could affect the growth of Bourke. We would like to get an extra metre in our weir.

**Mr WISE:** There is a subtle clause in the plan that did not get discussed yesterday but I spoke to the departmental people afterwards and said, "Does this clause mean that if it is signed off Wilcannia, Bourke and Walgett will never have a chance of increasing our weir?" I do not know whether any of you had the opportunity of seeing the weir at Wilcannia. It is a few sticks and two bits of concrete. It is in desperate need of replacement and upgrading. Basically, if this clause goes through it prevents any increase in weirs for the Barwon-Darling river system.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Even restoration?

**Mr WISE:** Yes, restoration or enhancement of the weir. It is a subtle little clause. So I immediately started sending emails off yesterday afternoon when I found that out. Getting back to social issues, there was a study done some years ago that the level of social unrest in Wilcannia was inversely proportionate to the amount of water in the weir. The less water in the weir pool, the more social unrest. Something as simple as that can have such an impact on communities.

**CHAIR:** I have a couple of questions about tourism in your area. I have had the opportunity to inspect, before it was completed, the Back O'Bourke facility. Can you give us an update on what impact that has had on tourism in Bourke? Also, what was the impact of the sealing on the Kidman Way on your communities?

**Mr LEWIS:** Certainly, the Kidman Way had a vast impact on that area, especially the road trains travelling across country, and the tourists, the caravans and mobile homes, the tarring from Hillston through to Bourke—

**CHAIR:** Where are those people coming from?

**Mr LEWIS:** Mr Wise probably knows the figures better but certainly Melbourne and Sydney and all through the Central West. I live on the Mitchell Highway north of Bourke and this amount of caravans, it used to be from Easter through to the long weekend in October but that is stretching out further and further, with poor air-conditioning in their caravans. The Back O'Bourke centre was officially opened two years ago—it has been open for 2½ years, back on 24 October. Last year our figures were fantastic. This year they have been good but not quite as good as last year. The information centre is now in the Back O'Bourke centre so that is certainly helping. In terms of tourism, we have the fantastic Kidman Caravan Park at Bourke and it is full quite a few months of the year.

**CHAIR:** With water in the river again, has that enhanced the number of tourists coming through?

**Mr LEWIS:** Yes. One of the big things last year was that people came, after seven or eight years of drought, to see the green. Like the red, come and see the green. We had a bit of trouble with the Sydney media saying the roads were shut but they were not shut at the time. We had to get on to the media and say, "You can get to Bourke, no worries about getting to Bourke, you come out and have a look at it while it is green and wet." They certainly did towards the end of last year. We would like to see the road now tarred through to Tibooburra. It would be fantastic to get it tarred through to there. I know a lot of roads need tarring but if we get that corner country highway, as we call it, tarred that will increase tourism again, because they could join up and make down to Broken Hill through the Silver City Highway. That would be fantastic. Mr Wise has more on the tourism figures.

**Mr WISE:** I guess there are a few aspects. Certainly, tourism is a growth industry and there is no doubt that it will continue to grow until the grey nomad population has moved on. This year across eastern Australia there was roughly a 30 per cent—in inland eastern Australia right through Queensland and the Northern Territory there was a 30 per cent reduction compared to last year. That is a pretty acknowledged figure. The linkage between tourism and a facility like the Back O'Bourke Exhibition Centre is that we have a paddle boat that goes twice a day on the river. They are enormous draw cards. They extend the time that a tourist stays in your community. I do not know the average duration they stay in Bourke now but it is probably about three days. That is great for the local targeted economy, the accommodation places, the caravans, the fuel outlets and the food. Not a lot of other businesses get much out of tourists. They actually cost council a lot of money. Councils are meant to lose around tourism because you have to provide public toilets and they damage the roads as much as anyone else and whatever.

Obviously we want to keep it going. It is why I am passionately committed to the idea of getting an Aboriginal cultural centre linked to the Back O'Bourke Exhibition Centre just as a quick building, if you like, because it would be so valuable to the wider population and it would make a comment about the tourists who have been up in the past couple of years. There is no doubt a lot of city-based people, urban-based people and even geographically based people have travelled the Darling River because of the water debate, because of the whole discussion about managing the Murray-Darling Basin system. People are saying, "I want to go and have a look first hand."

If you like, one positive of all the negatives of the debate has been people wanting to go and have a look. So that is good. As far as Kidman Way, just for everyone's sake, Bourke is on the shortest sealed route between Melbourne and Darwin and the shortest sealed route between Perth or Adelaide and Brisbane. From heavy haulage, from the tourists, whatever, we are fortunate with that. But there is no doubt road transport is so crucial right across the whole of north western New South Wales. The more that is improved, whether for local production, whether for tourism, whether for people like us who duck down here to Parkes for a day, roads, like information technology, are crucial to have as best you possibly can. That can only come from a large amount of Commonwealth and State support.

Certainly as Mr Lewis made a comment about the Corner Country Highway, there is an enormous population who think the only way to see inland Australia is to go to Alice Springs. I have absolutely no doubt that if the east-west road and the north-south road to Tibooburra were sealed there would be an enormous increase in the number of New South Wales people who would explore the accessible outback of Australia

**CHAIR:** It is interesting to note that the Queensland Government and their local government as well are contributing to sealing that road down to Warri Gate. The final stages of that are underway now. So it is

really up to New South Wales to complete that link. As you say, if we can look at getting that east-west road done at some stage then it will certainly provide a fantastic blacktop tourist route throughout western New South Wales.

**Mr WISE:** I can just respond to that from a different angle. In early August my wife and I did a very quick drive to Darwin and back. I observed all the tourist issues. We did not take the shortest route either. Birdsville still does not have a sealed route and Bedourie does not yet either. But apart from that, to my knowledge, there is not another town in Queensland other than up around the cape that does not have sealed roads. Yet we have it at Wanaaring, Tibooburra, Louth, Tilpa. You can get to virtually every community in Queensland on a sealed road, but not in western districts.

**Mr LEWIS:** And we are meant to be the Premier State.

**The Hon. STEVE WHAN:** Just following up on the tourist question, what is your view of the regional tourism organisation that you are part of now? It is a much bigger one than it used to be. Are you finding that appropriate, or are you concerned that you are in too big an area?

**Mr WISE:** I need more time to see it operating. Certainly the fact there is a bigger bucket of money and there is a bigger pool—fundamentally, just like we worked together through the Orana Regional Organisation of Councils for a lot of administrative things, we work together with our alliance on water and sewerage, it is only sensible that we work together with tourism.

There is no point in Bourke promoting tourism but ignoring all the towns that people have to pass through to get there. So the Kidman Way as mentioned earlier, it has been managed as a total corridor from the Victorian border to the Queensland border. I think that is the way State tourism can go as well, provided it does not get so big that there ends up being areas of competing common interest. That is the only anxiety—that it gets too big.

**Ms BARLOW:** All 11 Orana Regional Organisation of Councils members are now in the one regional tourism boundary, whereas before they were split.

**The Hon. STEVE WHAN:** It seems to be a very big area with some areas which do not have a lot of common interest, it seems to me.

**Ms BARLOW:** It is a massive area. I totally agree. But at least now all Orana Regional Organisation of Councils are in it together.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Sorry, the map I have got here has 13 councils. Which have left? I take it Wellington has gone?

**Ms BARLOW:** Wellington and Mid-Western.

**CHAIR:** We will draw this session to a close. I thank you again for taking the time and the effort to come down and speak to us. It has certainly been a worthwhile session for us. I hope you all have a safe journey home.

**Mr LEWIS:** Thank you for inviting us here to speak to you. We just hope we get some more interest in the back country and that things happen.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 2.35 p.m.)**