

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING**

**FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING**

**CORRECTED**

**At , Virtual hearing, Video conference, Sydney on Thursday, 7 October 2021**

**The Committee met at 3:55 pm**

**PRESENT**

Ms Cate Faehrmann (Chair)  
The Hon. Lou Amato  
The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Deputy Chair)  
The Hon. Sam Farraway  
The Hon. Ben Franklin  
The Hon. Rose Jackson  
The Hon. Adam Searle  
The Hon. Penny Sharpe  
The Hon. Mick Veitch



**The CHAIR:** Welcome to this virtual hearing for the inquiry into floodplain harvesting. Before I commence I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of the land upon which Parliament sits. I would also like to pay respect to the Elders past, present and emerging of the Eora nation and extend that respect to all Aboriginal people present. Today is the Committee's fourth hearing is being conducted virtually. This enables the work of the Committee to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic without compromising the health and safety of members, witnesses and staff. As we break new ground with the technology, I ask for everyone's patience through any technical difficulties we may encounter today. If participants lose their internet connection and are disconnected from the virtual hearing, they are asked to rejoin the hearing by using the same link as provided by the Committee secretariat. Today we will be hearing from the Australian Floodplain Association and the Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association.

Before we commence, I would like to make some brief comments about procedures for today's hearing. While parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses giving evidence today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the virtual hearing. I, therefore, urge witnesses to be careful about comments you may make to the media or to others after you complete your evidence. Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. In that regard, it is important that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily.

All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. There may be some questions that a witness could answer only if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. In these circumstances, witnesses are advised that they can take a question on notice and provide an answer at a later date. Today's proceedings are being streamed live and a transcript will be placed on the Committee's website once it becomes available.

Finally, I will make a few notes on virtual hearing etiquette to minimise disruptions and assist our Hansard reporters. I ask Committee members to clearly identify who questions are directed to and could I ask everyone to please state their name when they begin speaking. Could everyone please mute their microphones when they are not speaking. Please remember to turn your microphones back on when you are getting ready to speak. If you start speaking while muted—and it happens to all of us—please start your question or answer again so it can be recorded in the transcript. Members and witnesses should avoid speaking over each other so we can all be heard clearly. I remind members and witnesses to speak directly into the microphone and to avoid making comments when your head is turned away. I now welcome our witnesses.

**JUSTIN McCLURE**, President, Australian Floodplain Association, and Local Irrigator, Killara Station, sworn and examined

**STUART LE LIEVRE**, Vice-President, Australian Floodplain Association, sworn and examined

**GARRY HALL**, President, Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, and Landholder in the Macquarie Marshes, sworn and examined

**DUGALD BUCKNELL**, Member, Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, and Owner, Quambone Pastoral Company, sworn and examined

**Mr HALL:** There is a bit of a delay there.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Hall, it is good to know that there is a delay there. We will try to deal with that. There is time to make a short opening statement. We will go to the Australian Floodplain Association representatives. Do you have a short opening statement to make for the Committee?

**Mr McCLURE:** Thank you, Madam Chair. The Australian Floodplain Association is a community-based organisation that represents communities the length of the waterways in Australia, particularly in this case the Barwon-Darling. We seek equity for all communities and we believe that a healthy environment and economically stable communities support our community, so we strive for equity and we stand by that all communities matter and we do not want to see other communities prioritised over our communities. Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The CHAIR:** That was Justin McClure. Just for Hansard's sake, particularly probably for Mr Hall and Mr Bucknell, if you could, every time you speak, say your name so Hansard gets who is who but I remind probably everybody to do that, including Mr McClure and Mr Le Lievre. We will go to the Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association. Who is giving the opening statement?

**Mr HALL:** Gary Hall.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks.

**Mr HALL:** The New South Wales Government's message has been that, if water regulation had passed, the Macquarie Marshes but would currently receive more water. This is incorrect as the proposed licensing of floodplain harvest volumes is actually the Government's estimation of existing take—no reduction in extraction. The Government's message is incorrect. Floodplains and wetlands have been grazed by livestock for millennia. Our association takes extremely seriously our obligation we have as custodians of the landscape to responsibly manage the Macquarie Marshes. Two of our members have their land privately listed under the Ramsar convention and graze under the wise use principles.

We have Ramsar management plans developed, and all marsh landholders work closely with Government agencies allowing and assisting with the monitoring and reporting of environmental flows. The evidence clearly shows that responsible grazing promotes water couch and the majority of the bird-breeding colonies are located on, or adjacent to, privately managed land. From early European settlement the Macquarie Marshes were grazed with little impact to the ecosystem. With the development of upstream dams and river regulation, our businesses have seen a massive reduction in productivity. With the purchase of water licences by both State and Commonwealth governments, some water has been returned to the wetland. This is only a small part of what was originally available to the system.

Historically, grazing livestock in any wetland or flood plain increases drought security and underpins our property values. Marsh landholders and other floodplain graziers typically pay a premium for land that benefits from inundation. Environmental flows alone are unable to achieve large scale bird-breeding events that the Macquarie Marshes are known for. Floodplain inundation and water levels are critical to provide the specific conditions that trigger such events. Floodplain harvesting has detrimental impacts on these events.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Now we will go straight to questions, starting with the Opposition. Ms Rose Jackson.

**The Hon. ROSE JACKSON:** Thanks, Chair, and thanks everyone for coming along and giving evidence today and talking to the Committee. No doubt your submissions were excellent and I am sure that your contributions will be very valuable. I want to start with quite a general question that I want to put to both groups and anyone can feel free to jump in. I think everyone is committed to trying to resolve this issue. The current situation just is not really working for anyone. How would you describe a fair way forward? Considering where we are now, considering what has happened with regulatory efforts for disallowance, what is a fair way forward

that does deliver equity for communities? How would you describe that? What are you looking for from the Government and this Committee?

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Stuart Le Livre. I will start the ball rolling. I think, very simply, it is that we want a balanced use of water to everybody—irrigators, all communities, Indigenous. It does not matter what it is, there has to be a balance put into it. Very simply, we think that is achieved by connectivity and a system flow [audio malfunction].

**The CHAIR:** Connection issues, I am afraid, Mr McClure and Mr Le Lievre. I just want to pause you there. I am sorry to interrupt. I will keep talking because we are not hearing you. Could you turn your video off?

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** [Inaudible].

**The CHAIR:** We have got that yellow triangle of death that appears. I think the secretariat is contacting them. We are now on this vicious loop of audio. I think we are okay.

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Can you hear it?

**The CHAIR:** While we are fixing that up, let us go just over to the Macquarie Marshes, to Mr Hall.

**Mr HALL:** Yes. I will put Mr Bucknell on.

**Mr BUCKNELL:** It is Dugald here.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr BUCKNELL:** The solution, in my opinion, is actually to have an open terms of reference royal commission into the whole system so that all the evidence can come out with the aim of making it long-term sustainable so that it is not good enough to just satisfy one group and not have it sustainable. So, what we really need is completely open terms of reference with just one goal and that is the long-term sustainability of the system for future generations and to stop this situation where people are wasting the whole of their lives over this continuous argument that has been going on for 50 years. We are better off stopping it now rather than waiting until the environment, such as the birds in the Macquarie Marshes are gone, and then being forced to have a royal commission. So, we are better off having one early, beforehand.

**The CHAIR:** Can I check whether we have Mr McClure and Mr Le Lievre back? Can you hear me?

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Yes, Madam Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Le Lievre, we did not get any of your response. Would you start again?

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Thanks, Madam Chair. We believe that all water users have a part to play in the system and there should be a better balance, but there should not be a community that is disadvantaged because somebody else thinks they have a right to take water, especially our communities downstream. We believe it is achievable by connectivity within all the valleys with inter-system flow targets and a better balance in them so that everybody can get a fair and reasonable crack at it. But also, the water hierarchy or water use that is in the Water Management Act needs to be adhered to to the absolute letter. That will then allow all these other things to happen.

**The Hon. ROSE JACKSON:** Your view is that currently the hierarchy of use that, as you say, is enshrined in law in the Water Management Act is not being adhered to as properly or as rigorously as it could be. Do you want to elaborate on that? Why are you concerned that that priority use provision in the Water Management Act is not currently being adhered to?

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Well, if you go back to the last drought that we have just had, had the priority of water use been adhered to, the activities that were up further north when there were sporadic storms and all that sort of stuff that were up there, it would have at least made parts of the river wet. But, as it was, we just had to start from scratch. Now, when the Warrego came down past us a couple of years ago, that gave us our first freshwater for three years and it did not make Wilcannia, but, it was allowed to go through unimpeded while up north other activities took place. So, no, it was not adhered to. I know that the Minister then did do a section 324 on it, which helped immensely. But before that, Goondiwindi had 10 inches up there and it did not even make—you know, none of it made anywhere near the Barwon-Darling.

**Mr McCLURE:** If I could comment, upstream water sharing plans must have real connectivity provisions which deliver water to the valley downstream. Without connectivity guaranteed getting through systems, we are never, ever going to have a healthy system. Water sharing plans need to fix the connectivity issues. The way of doing that is point-of-take rules in the north across all licence classes and strategic downstream targets at Walgett, Bourke and, importantly, at Menindee, because this debate is bigger than the northern Basin and bigger than the southern Basin. We are a connected basin. We need to look at it on a holistic basis.

**The Hon. ROSE JACKSON:** Could you talk a little bit more about what some of those downstream flow targets might look like? We have heard a lot of evidence about the important role that they could play. Can you give us a bit more of a sense about what you are actually looking for in terms of those targets? What might the targets look like?

**Mr McClure:** I saw some figures today and I saw some draft plans going forward that suggested a 195 gigalitre level at Menindee. If Menindee fell below that level then there would be no take in the north; no supplementary take; no A, B or C class licensing access; and definitely no floodplain harvesting access until that flow was guaranteed to reach Menindee. That is a realistic figure but it is a real figure. It is a figure that has a history and it is a link that has a history. C class licences in the Barwon-Darling prior to the 2012 Act were linked to a capacity at Menindee. Those particular licences have fallen by the wayside, but a precedent has been set and I think that will give a very, very good outcome for the communities the length of the Barwon-Darling.

**The Hon. ROSE JACKSON:** I will ask the representatives from the Macquarie Marshes a question and then I will hand over to my colleague Mr Veitch. In terms of the outcomes, particularly the environmental outcomes, that you are looking for, how would you describe them in a way that might be embedded in any licensing regime? What is a way that we could look to describe the environmental outcomes that we need to see in the Macquarie Marshes as part of a licensing regime for floodplain harvesting?

**Mr BUCKNELL:** What I would like to outline are the bird numbers since they have been recorded. In 1970s the ibis bird numbers in the rookeries were about 500,000 breeding pair. In 2010 and 2011 the ibis numbers were recorded at 50,000 breeding pair each year. In 2016 ibis numbers were recorded at 30,000 breeding pair for one year. The average life expectancy of an ibis is guesstimated at about eight years. We think the ibis, because all of us were using the Macquarie Marshes as a nature reserve for bird breeding, are the apex animal. With an average guesstimated age of eight years—not the oldest, not the youngest—this would mean that the average parent birds from 2016 are already dead. The only surviving Macquarie Marshes-bred ibis are the chicks from 2016, and they are halfway through their life expectancy.

Ibis only breed when there is a big flood—that is, a La Nina weather event—so last year and this year. The weather cycles turn. We have dry years and wet years—extreme variability. It may not happen again for another five to eight years. By the time that comes round, we might not have any ibis that are bred in the Macquarie Marshes. What I think we need to be looking at is an environmentally sustainable level of take [ESLT] established at the end of each of the river systems and when that ESLT is not reached each year, the quantity of water that it is short by is carried over to the future year. Once that builds up and a first-flow event type of situation arrives, that carried-over water quantity needs to be let go past so that the environment has a chance to repair, restore and maintain itself.

**The Hon. MICK VEITCH:** Mr McClure, in your submission, the thirteenth dot point of the 14 dot points states, "FPH licences cannot include provisions for tradable rights." Why do you say that? It is pretty important for the Committee to get an understanding of why you do not think these licences should be tradable.

**Mr McClure:** Mr Veitch, as you know, I live in the heart of the mid-Darling. Over time we have seen the local licences transferred upstream and to other areas. The transfer of those licences has been a transfer of equity. When the water has been transferred upstream, it takes away the ability of our communities to generate wealth, to employ people, to give people a sense of worth. I really feel strongly that each and every community should have an equal opportunity to have access to water to sustain and nourish its communities. We are one community out here in the west. I see that as very important.

**The CHAIR:** The Opposition's question time has come to an end, unfortunately. It is always too short. I will ask the first couple of questions on behalf of the crossbench. I want to ask about the issue with rainfall run-off. Firstly to the Macquarie Marshes guys, you have in your submission quite an extraordinary figure that there are 50,000 hectares of developed irrigation land in the Macquarie Valley. Could you explain why the rainfall run-off exemption will make such an impact and what you think about that? Then I will ask the same question to the AFA.

**Mr HALL:** The rainfall run-off exemption in the Macquarie Valley is a huge reduction of catchment of the flood plain. Not all of the irrigable area in the Macquarie historically was catchment. But the 50,000 hectares of developed land comes with surge areas with areas of channels, areas of headlands where our assumption is approximately 50,000 hectares of the Macquarie catchment has those irrigators, who are mainly general security irrigators that also have access to supplementary access licences—the old off-allocation; over and above—that could possibly now be harvesting the total volume of water from that irrigable area under this rainfall run-off exemption. It is staggering, the total volume of megalitres that will be unavailable to the environment—to the marshes and to the longitudinal connectivity of the Macquarie to the Barwon-Darling—without that water in the system.

**Mr BUCKNELL:** Could I give you some idea of the quantity? If you are talking 50,000 hectares, the average rainfall at Auscott at Warren, which is the lower end—Dubbo is the higher end—is about 500 millilitres a year average. Dubbo is about 600 millilitres a year average. If you catch all that water on 50,000 hectares, that is 250,000 megalitres on an average rainfall. Of course some of that is going to be soakage, but it is an enormous amount of water that needs to be taken account of. We are talking the average here. What about the increase above average years? That is when most of the water is going to actually flow off and be inflows, or should have been originally inflows into the river. You are looking 250,000 megalitres plus, and that figure needs to be taken into account in the cap and also in what is claimed to be over-recovery of water in the Macquarie. It brings to mind the models that are being used if that water is not being accounted for.

**The CHAIR:** I will go to Justin and Stuart. Recognising I do not have much time, I want to include in this question the same response because I understand that the bulk of floodplain harvesting, for example in the Barwon-Darling, is now taken from rainfall run-off rather than overbank flow. If Justin or Stuart could speak to some examples as well.

**Mr McCLURE:** We object on principle, as outlined by Mr Bucknell. I have not got any examples.

**The CHAIR:** That is excellent because there is a lot more to ask you about. I understand the Government has been doing an assessment of floodplain works at the moment. What is your understanding of that assessment of floodplain works and what are your views on the whole compensable nature of floodplain harvesting? We are hearing that potentially, for example, if some floodplain works in the future have to be removed, there are concerns raised by some witnesses that even that will be compensable. Justin and Stuart I will start with you. Do you know anything in that regard?

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** We are unaware of any report at this stage but the Government are out there having a look at it. The last report was through Slattery and Johnson. Our fundamental thing is that any illegal works have to be removed, and any works that impede the flow of water overland into the water when there are obviously downstream needs, they have to have regulators put on them so that that water can make the stream.

**The CHAIR:** Garry or Dugald, do you have anything in relation to the compensable nature of floodplain harvesting entitlements?

**Mr HALL:** Yes, I object to the compensation process here. If you have got an illegal structure that is deemed ineligible, surely it is your cost to remove and open up the floodway. That is totally unacceptable in our association's opinion. I have had personal experience with compliance on this. I am very disappointed, as I have outlined in my personal submission, about the lack of knowledge sharing amongst the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment [DPIE], WaterNSW and the Natural Resources Access Regulator [NRAR]. I think those of us who have been involved in the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and water policy development and the development of water strategies really need a good, solid compliance department. It appears to me, from personal experience, that NRAR are not getting enough information. I am extremely concerned that they are not well enough funded and I do believe that there is a high turnover of staff. If this agency is going to be effective, we need reassuring that NRAR is going to be capable of doing the job, and it is a big job with a lot of unapproved works in the mid-catchment in the Macquarie.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. My time has expired.

**Mr BUCKNELL:** [Disorder].

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, who was that?

**Mr BUCKNELL:** One thing that has to be remembered is once the water is captured in the irrigation system, it does not matter whether it was floodplain harvesting or general security or high security or carryover; whatever it was, it is all a litre of water. So it can be arbitrated between floodplain harvesting water and regulated water in the dam. It will have to be compensated at the maximum value of any use of any sale price. It has to be kept in mind that it is not just some little section off one side. All water can be arbitrated in some way into the market. This has to be kept in mind when it comes to compensation and compensable rights.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. That was Mr Bucknell, was it, just for Hansard?

**Mr BUCKNELL:** Yes. My apologies.

**The CHAIR:** That is okay. My time has expired.

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Madam Chair, Stuart Le Lievre speaking. I did not quite answer that question you asked properly. As far as the compensation goes, with the AFA, there is no compensation of those works that are illegal, and we do not believe the licences should be compensable until, and if, we would be able to get it right.

So whatever licences are handed out, we have got no idea, without having at least 10 years, whether that number is right or not. In that case, we do not believe there should be compensable licences either.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We will now move to Mr Mark Banasiak.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I have only really got one question, then I will throw to the Government. Mr McClure, in the submission of the Australian Floodplain Association, you talked about this concept of temporary licences, and it has been brought up a few times through these hearings. Is it your understanding, though, that there is no actual current legislative framework that supports such a mechanism, so what you are proposing would actually require not only regulation but a legislative change as well?

**Mr McClURE:** Justin McClure here. I think that is the case. It is really important we get this right. It is critically important we get it right because there is hundreds of millions of dollars that will come out of the public purse if we get it wrong; there will be communities desecrated. We need to get this right, we need to uphold the law, and if we need to change the legislation to accommodate, then so be it.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Thank you. That is me, Chair, so I will throw to Lou Amato, I think.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Lou Amato, over to you.

**The Hon. LOU AMATO:** Thank you all for coming along to today's inquiry. I have got a couple of questions, and I will throw them out to the whole panel; I do not mind who answers it, or you can all answer it. My first question is: What real changes have been made in the past three years in the Barwon-Darling and how have these rules changed river operations?

**Mr McClURE:** Justin McClure here. There have been some substantial changes in the Barwon-Darling: active management, the "first flush" rule, downstream targets to a degree. That has been a good outcome, but that is not the big issue. The big issue here is the upstream valleys that supply 95 per cent of the water to the Barwon-Darling. The changes to the Barwon-Darling, okay, fair enough, they are important and they have had an impact and have made an impact, but you cannot share water you are not getting. So it is critically important that upstream valleys recognise connectivity, and that includes Queensland. I hope I have answered your question, Lou.

**The Hon. LOU AMATO:** Thank you very much, Justin. The next question is: Do you agree with the Central Darling Shire, the South West Water Users association, Graeme McCrabb and other Menindee residents when they state that the policy around the 640/480 gegalitre rule has not delivered good outcomes for the lower Darling communities through its management by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority?

**Mr McClURE:** Justin McClure here. I fully support that submission. Yes, it is not working for the lower Darling community, 100 per cent.

**The Hon. LOU AMATO:** Thank you, Mr McClure. I will pass you over to my colleague Mr Ben Franklin.

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** I will also start with Mr McClure, if I may. There has been suggestion, obviously, by the Government and by other parties that in fact more water would go to the environment if the Government's policy to license and meter floodplain harvesting had been in effect and in place for the last year. I note that that was something that the Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association took issue with. So I would just be interested in what your comments might be on that suggestion, Mr McClure.

**Mr McClURE:** Thank you, Mr Franklin. I tend to agree. I think that if legislation was in place and the numbers were clawed back in the northern tribs to adhere to the cap number, there is a very, very high chance that there would be more water in the system.

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Can I move on now just to talk about a couple of practical and logistical issues. These questions are to both organisations but we might start, as a matter of course, with the Australian Floodplain Association, then move on to the Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association. We will start with a question about the Western Weirs strategy. Do you think we should replace fixed crested weirs with bigger gated structures with fishways in them in communities like Pooncarie, Menindee, Wilcannia, Bourke, Collarenebri, those sorts of places? We will start with you, Mr McClure.

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Stuart Le Lievre, Madam Chair and Mr Franklin.

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Of course. Apologies.

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Look, we agree absolutely wholeheartedly and we need more of them, and your suggestion is something that we have been asking for for quite some time and we do support that 100 per cent.



**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Could you speak to why you support it so strongly, Mr Le Lievre?

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** You get a better balance of flow especially with this climate change issue and everything else. You are going to get a better balance of flow and it will take the boom-and-bust cycle out of it. You get surety for all concerned: You will get surety for towns, you get surety for cultural and Indigenous things, you get surety for landholder rights. At the moment, a lot of the weirs—there a couple around Louth, for example, that (a) are not big enough and (b) they are leaking anyway. There is not enough of them to hold enough water up so we can guarantee especially critical human need.

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Could we move on to Mr Hall or Mr Bucknell? Any comments that you have about the Western Weirs strategy and those issues?

**Mr BUCKNELL:** It is Dugald Bucknell here. Really, we should not be commenting on them because we are in the Macquarie, which is above the Barwon-Darling. The Macquarie flow should be flowing into the Barwon-Darling, and if we had a proper environmentally sustainable level of take [ESLT] which took into account the flows required downstream, some of these problems would have actually been fixed by actually having more water flowing in from the upstream rivers. But also note we do support, in any weirs that are put out there, fishways and things to take care of the environment that way. So, yes, we do support them, but we feel that the bigger problem is that too much water has been taken out of the system in the first place from the upstream rivers.

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Understood. Can I stay with you, please—sorry, was that Mr Hall or Mr Bucknell?

**Mr BUCKNELL:** That is Mr Bucknell.

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Sorry. Thank you so much. I will stay with you, if I may, and just stay on the specifics of what can be done environmentally. I understand your premise and I accept that that is your position, but can we go to some of the other things that perhaps can also be done like, for example, getting rid of feral pest species like carp? You talked about improving fish passage, but I wonder if you agree that habitat and screening should be improved. Removing grazing pressure, for example, combating thermal pollution in headwater storages—are these the sorts of things you think we should be looking at as well to get better environmental outcomes? If (a) you could talk to that and (b) if there are others of those specific sort of processes that we could look out that you think would be helpful, I would be grateful.

**Mr BUCKNELL:** I am delighted to be able to answer the question. It comes up quite regularly. It is Dugald Bucknell here again, by the way. Those things that you speak of should be on top of, not instead of, enough water to repair, restore and maintain the environment to an ESLT. Those things in themselves will not create an environmentally sustainable level of take. The thing that is really important here is the quantity of water. To give you a real idea, in the first 50 years of last century it was considered to be a dry 50 years. The second 50 years of last century was considered to be a wetter 50 years.

Now, after 20 years past 1950—so 20 years past of the first 50—and three basic flood events, there were a million birds in the Macquarie Marshes. Back then things were very different. We had rabbit plagues and we had overstocking because of rabbit plagues. We did not have the ability to move livestock on and off places when a drought occurred because obviously trucks were not the size they are now. We did not have the ability to bring fodder in and we did not have the ability for big stock water storages and that sort of thing. So 20 years after the first 50 years, we had a million birds in the marshes—ibis in the marshes. The second 50 years, which is considered wetter, 20 years after that—and the rabbits are not there—we are looking at the situation that the birdlife in the Macquarie Marshes is going to be gone. The ibis bred in the Macquarie Marshes are going to be gone in the next term of government. Now, that gives you some idea that the problem is the quantity of water that is here [disorder].

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Thank you, Mr Bucknell. I take that point and, as I said, I totally understand that that is your view. I am just trying to look at a range of different things that can be done, potentially. Mr McClure or Mr Le Lievre, did you want to comment on some of those, I guess, practical environmental measures that might be able to put in place to assist the sort of outcomes that I think we all want to see?

**Mr McCLURE:** Justin McClure here again. I think downstream targets—a realistic target at Menindee is going to address the social, cultural and economic outcomes for our communities to a degree. So that is why I believe that connectivity and point-of-take rules that are linked to floodplain harvesting need to hit those targets before floodplain harvesting is allowed. I think it is pretty simple. That is our argument to sell. Thank you.

**Mr Le LIEVRE:** Stuart Le Lievre. Could I just make another quick comment in relation to that? I think we need to keep in mind—and I think this is the crux of the matter—depending on who you talk to, that it is somewhere between 30 and roughly 50 per cent less in-flow in the last 25 years and supposedly it is going to get worse. Whoever is right, whether the 30 per cent is right or the 50 per cent is right—and that is going to depend

on some of this modelling—it has just got to get a lot better but even if you picked on 30 per cent, that figure is enormous and that is what has got to be attended to.

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Okay. Thank you. Can I just circle back to the question? I assume that you are—well, no, I am not going to assume anything. Do you agree that we need to do more as well? Apart from the issues that you have just raised—to get rid of feral pest species, to improve fish passage and habitat, to remove grazing pressure, to combat thermal pollution, those sorts of things—do you think that those are worthy aims as well in this process?

**Mr McClure:** Justin McClure here. Sustainable agriculture is the future and all of the above mentioned issues—ferals et cetera—are completely linked to sustainability and sustainable river systems and sustainable farming, so a concentrated effort to minimise the impact is, yes, highly recommended.

**The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN:** Thank you. Madam Chair, I think my time is about to expire, so I am happy to leave it there.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. That is the end of our time for questions. I thank all of you for appearing today. That is also the end of our hearing. Thank you so much for making the time. I am really glad that we were able to organise this additional hearing. That was really valuable evidence. Your submissions have also been fantastic, with lots of really solid recommendations. Thank you all for the advocacy work that you have done over many years and we really appreciate your time. If you have taken any questions on notice, the secretariat will be in touch with you, and there possibly may be supplementary questions. That is the end of our hearing today.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**The Committee adjourned at 16:45.**