

6 April 2011

---

## MDBA Chair Mr Craig Knowles' speech to the Sustaining Rural Communities Conference (Narrabri)

Good morning to you all.

At the outset I would like to acknowledge the Gomilaroi community and pay my respects to them the traditional owners of the land.

Can I also thank Mal Peters, an old partner in crime, for the personal invitation to talk with you this morning.

Indeed, to all the distinguished guests and particularly the Mayor of Narrabri, thank you for the invitation.

In the context of a conference that is all about sustaining rural communities I think it is important, right at the front end of my remarks that I acknowledge my work is all about re-engaging people who have been left out of the process to date and to ask for your help in making the work I do better and more relevant to the people who live and work in the Murray-Darling Basin.

It is no secret that I have a poor opinion of the Guide that was released last year.

But it's time to move on.

I have said that I do not have a high degree of ownership of the Guide and that both symbolically and practically my appointment as the new Chair is a chance for a fresh start. So over the last couple of months I've begun the process of re-engagement.

In short summary, I've been criss-crossing the Basin talking with and listening to local communities. I've been talking to your governments, the Ministers and the Sir Humphreys, and of course I've been talking to all the peak industry groups in an attempt to re-start a conversation which stalled last year.

I haven't added them up but I think the meetings are now in their hundreds, as are the phone calls and the conversations and I can tell you that the messages are pretty consistent.

- People want to have a say, they don't want to be 'consulted', they want a chance to have a conversation.
- People want to have their historic efforts recognised.
- They want certainty, but it's a certainty that has a future.
- They want me to get on with things and not delay.
- People understand that balance is the objective - you can't have a healthy environment without a healthy economy and you can't have healthy economies and strong social fabrics unless your river and landscapes are constantly nurtured and in a strong state of health.
- In particular, people who work the land find it insulting to be accused by some sections of the community of being environmental vandals. Many of those farmers

have a generational attachment to the land and a vested interest in maintaining a healthy landscape - next years' profit and their legacy for future generations of their family depend on it.

- Likewise aboriginal communities have a 40 000 year plus attachment to the land. Their cultural and spiritual heritage and beliefs need to be respected and taken into account.
- People warm to the concept of a healthy working Basin, they understand that the Murray-Darling is a major contributor to our Nation's wealth. It provides food and fibre as well as jobs and homes for literally hundreds of thousands of people.
- People expect their governments to be better at managing water - the stories of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing are too numerous to mention and it's about time we got it right, that the processes of buyback and infrastructure funding and state government programs as well as the role and functions of the environmental water holders at Commonwealth and State levels be better aligned and more streamlined to serve and benefit communities rather than tie them up in more red tape.
- And most of all people will tell you (as they have told me for the last 25 years of my public life) that if they are just given the resources and the opportunity and a degree of trust they can deliver at a local level the results that are just impossible to deliver if you try and do it from Capital Hill.

So these are the messages from the valleys. And I want to assure you that I've taken them direct to the Ministers who oversee water, right around the Basin.

Just last Friday all of the water Ministers met in Sydney and signed off on an agreement which is fundamentally important to the work that we are now undertaking.

All the messages I've just read to you I told to them.

I can assure you they heard them loud and clear, and in return, they demonstrated a clear commitment to a better way forward.

Specifically a commitment to:

- work more closely together
- review all of the opportunities to better align programs like buyback, infrastructure programs and environmental water management
- and, perhaps most importantly, they signed off formally on a commitment to strengthen the involvement of local communities in the design and rollout of State and Commonwealth programs right across the Basin including the Basin Plan.

These three points are fundamental.

The first, about working more closely together, sends a clear message to State and Commonwealth bureaucracies, including the MDBA, that the Mexican stand-off that has been in place for the last couple of years over water is now at an end.

There is a clear expectation by Ministers that their senior officials will work together, share information, develop practical solutions and create workable, sensible water sharing plans that can be implemented in a coordinated and rational fashion.

Importantly, the Ministers have agreed to meet on a regular monthly basis to benchmark performance.

The second point is about making sure that the very large buckets of money in buyback and infrastructure programs are put to work in better ways to deliver better results.

I make the point that the draft Basin Plan which will go on exhibition in the middle of this year will only be successful if it is cast in a context of a more holistic plan for the Basin. How buyback is used, how infrastructure money is employed to do clever things in environmental management as well as on-farm and off-farm works will be critical to the implementation of the Plan.

Equally, how the Commonwealth and States manage environmental water in the context of a market based system will be vital to the success of any water management plan produced by the MDBA.

The Governments' collective agreement to better align all of these programs and, along the way, speed up the processes of implementation, gives me great hope that we are at last getting on to the same page.

And finally, the Ministers decision on localism, is the real breakthrough.

Many of us know through our own experience that the best results, and the ones that last, are those that come from local settings.

The Basin is full of examples where, with some resources and some authority, local groups are already working in partnership, striking the balance between production and environmental needs.

There are lots more - in fact after I leave here this morning I'm going to have a look at some more local initiatives here in the Namoi.

Of course what this is all about is an understanding that the fine-grained solutions to finding the balance and managing river health is best done by local people who know their part of the river with intimate and detailed knowledge.

It's a recognition that solutions that might work in one catchment or on one river system might not work in another - river management really is about horses for courses - and to pretend that you can develop the detailed solutions from Canberra or Macquarie St, Sydney is simply naïve.

Years ago I developed Catchment Management Authorities in NSW in an attempt to devolve land and water management away from the centre and empower the regions.

Years later my belief that local communities are more likely to get it right remains undiminished.

That's why I'm so pleased that the Ministers have decided to start a conversation about what localism might mean in the management of water.

It is really important that you all join in and have your say because the work that is currently underway in the development of the draft Basin Plan will be encouraging localism too.

In that context I want to give an opportunity for local communities to take ownership of the plan and manage their part of the system for the long term.

The plan we put out in the next couple of months will of course comply with the Act and it will contain our best estimates of the sustainable diversion limits and the environmentally sustainable level of take.

But the big thing that will be different to the Guide is that these numbers will not be an end point they will be the start of a process, a process to turn my plan into our plan.

Where the Guide gave the image of a big cut all happening on one day our process will talk about how much we've already done and what's left to do.

We will have regard to our history of effort.

In addition, the water sharing plans of the States need to be better aligned.

As you know, water sharing plans in each State have different end dates ranging from 2012 in South Australia through to 2019 in Victoria with other States somewhere in between at around 2014 and 2015.

I think it is inevitable that alignment will occur around 2019.

What that means is that there will be ample time to use the processes of infrastructure funding, buyback, environmental water management to continuously move toward achieving the plan.

In some river valleys the plan will be achieved early in the period, other places will take longer.

It also means that there will be time to interrogate the draft plan on a catchment by catchment basis.

I envisage that the numbers will be challenged.

As I said earlier the numbers that I produce in the next couple of months should be the start of a process of implementation rather than the end of a conversation.

Logically that implies that, if it can be demonstrated that the environmental objectives for a given catchment can be achieved with a different regime of water management then we should be willing to accept the evidence.

This process within the context of a proper strategic framework, which is the Basin Plan, gives more time for regional communities to adjust and take ownership of finding solutions for improvements in water use efficiency.

By taking ownership we provide a higher level of certainty that the solutions that are developed are ones that will last and be accepted by local communities.

Part of the work will be to develop the process of how that can happen, and as I've said I believe it's more likely that local processes and local engagement will produce better results. So unlike the Guide, the next few months presents an opportunity to those of you who want to engage in the process and to build a framework for local implementation.

It's a chance to take control of the agenda and do the things you've told me you can do if only the government would give you that chance.

Well the opportunity is here, now.

If you choose to take it I am confident that the Basin plan can be a collaborative effort, owned and operated by local communities, not a competition between conservation and production and a plan which will underpin for generations to come a healthy working Basin.

ENDS

**For more information contact the MDBA Media office at [media@mdba.gov.au](mailto:media@mdba.gov.au)**



Receive MDBA updates via [http://twitter.com/MD\\_Basin\\_Auth](http://twitter.com/MD_Basin_Auth)

Trim: D11/9971