



The Hon. David Littleproud MP

**Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources
Federal Member for Maranoa**

Ref: MC18-014076

Mr Robert McBride
Tolarno Station
WENTWORTH NSW 2648

19 JUN 2018

Via email: tolarno@chariot.net.au

Dear Mr McBride

Thank you for your letter of 6 April 2018 to the Prime Minister, the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP, regarding the Murray–Darling Basin, in particular the health of the Darling River and a call for a Federal Royal Commission. Your letter was forwarded to me as the Minister responsible for the matters you have raised. I apologise for the delay in replying.

I note with interest your views and ideas on improving the health of the Murray Darling Basin, particularly the Lower Darling, to support the sustainability of those communities that rely on it. The Australian Government is committed to delivering the Basin Plan in full and on time and in a way that ensures the best possible outcomes for Basin communities and the environment.

I appreciate serious concerns have been raised about compliance and enforcement and the management of water resources in the Basin. As I flagged in my earlier letter, significant action has been taken to address these issues and to restore confidence in the management of water in New South Wales and the Murray-Darling Basin. This includes a Basin-wide compliance review by the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) supported by an Independent Panel and the subsequent development of a Compliance Compact that was agreed by all Basin jurisdictions on 8 June 2018.

On 7 May 2018, the government reached an agreement with the Federal Opposition to deliver crucial Basin Plan amendments that give effect to the outcomes of the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) adjustment mechanism and Northern Basin Review (NBR). These commitments include provision for a new Northern Basin Commissioner who will report on the implementation of the NBR and delivery of compliance reforms. The agreement also provides for up to \$20 million to support improved hydrometric networks in the Northern Basin and the development of remote sensing and other technologies to enhance monitoring, measurement and compliance. The full package of commitments is available at www.minister.gov.au.

Additionally, I acknowledge the strong progress made by the NSW government on water compliance and monitoring in the Basin which includes the establishment of the independent Natural Resources Access Regulator. As such, the government considers that the processes that have been put in place to address misconduct and water theft in the Basin are appropriate. I remain unconvinced that a Royal Commission can contribute further to the strengthening of compliance in the Basin.

I recognise the concern about the local issues and the condition of the Lower Darling and its ability to support the ongoing well-being of the communities and environment. As you may be aware, the NSW government is progressing the Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan for accreditation by the MDBA. This plan will include measures to ensure protection of environmental flows from consumptive diversion, measures that were subject to a trial in a recent environmental flow event.

In relation to your concern for the management of the water resources in the lower Darling and Menindee Lakes system, governments have collectively agreed through the Murray Darling Basin Agreement (the Agreement) on how to operate the Murray and Lower Darling system to maximise overall water availability. These rules mean that water is drawn from the less efficient storages at Menindee in preference to Hume and Dartmouth Dams. Under the Agreement, as storage levels fall below the trigger level of 480GL, all remaining water is reserved for local supply. Rainfall and inflows from the Northern Basin remain critical to replenish the lakes when they fall below this 480GL trigger, with management responsibilities changing once storage levels rise above 640 GL. The MDBA calls water from the Menindee Lakes, on behalf of the joint governments, in accordance with the Agreement. Any proposal to change the shares of the River Murray and Lower Darling water resource under the Agreement would require agreement by NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

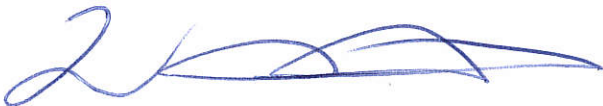
As you know, the Menindee Lakes Reconfiguration project has been put forward by NSW under the SDL adjustment mechanism. Reconfiguration of the Lakes seeks to achieve water savings that offset water that would otherwise need to be recovered for the environment. This project is in the early stage of development and there remains a lot of detail to be resolved in consultation with local communities. The current project scope includes regulators between the four Lakes and channels to enable access to existing dead storage so this water can be released to the Darling River. This is consistent with your suggestion. I expect your proposal for the construction of additional weirs on the Darling would be able to be considered by the NSW government for inclusion in the project scope if it could further improve system efficiency.

In relation to broader SDL adjustment outcomes, the MDBA will deliver its first annual technical workshop on the package of measures that form part of the SDL adjustment mechanism by 30 June 2018. I am confident the workshops will build confidence in the scientific integrity of the projects while ensuring there is increased transparency and engagement with communities and stakeholders.

I have sent a copy of this letter to Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon. Michael McCormack MP and the Hon. Mark Coulton MP.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to the government's attention.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'David Littleproud', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD MP

cc Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon. Michael McCormack MP
Hon. Mark Coulton MP