



# MACQUARIE MARSHES ENVIRONMENTAL LANDHOLDERS ASSOCIATION

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### **Introduction :**

The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA) was formed in 1995 when there was increasing pressure to further reduce water flows to the Macquarie Marshes. Its members are local landholders, many of whom are third and fourth generation landholders in the area, and all are dedicated to ensuring a healthy and productive marsh for future generations.

The aim of MMELA is:

*The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA) aims to ensure the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the internationally recognised Macquarie Marshes.*

The Macquarie Marshes is a large semi-permanent, **flow through** wetland on the lower end of the Macquarie River in central western NSW. It covers an area of approximately 200,000ha of which 12% is a Nature Reserve managed by the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS). The remaining 88% is privately owned freehold land which supports an extensive agricultural industry. Much of the land has been held in families for generations and the property owners have an extraordinary knowledge and understanding of all aspects of the Marshes and its management.

The Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve, “Wilgara” Wetland and U Block are listed on the Ramsar Convention of Wetlands of International Importance. The Nature Reserve is also listed on the Japan - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (JAMBA) and the China - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (CAMBA) along with several other agreements. It is the responsibility of the whole community, including State and Federal Governments, to ensure management of the wetland does not compromise values and/or obligations set out in the above mentioned agreements.

The Macquarie Marshes is unique both environmentally and economically. Research indicates it is the most important colonial nesting waterbird breeding site in Australia for species diversity and nesting density (*Kingsford and Thomas 1995*). The majority of the breeding colonies are situated on privately owned land where landholders have managed and protected them since settlement. The Marshes also support an extensive cattle grazing industry which is its main economic focus. Sustainable grazing is encouraged by MMELA and the majority of landholders are acutely aware of the environmental needs of the wetland and undertake congruent management practices.

Government policy and decision making relating to natural resource management has in the past had devastating impacts on the Marshes, particularly water management, which has severely reduced water flows through river regulation and other such legislation.

When Burrendong Dam was completed and irrigation was established throughout the Macquarie Valley scientific research showed flows to the internationally recognised Macquarie Marshes were greatly decreased. MMELA brought this to the attention of many governments and fought for water to be recovered for this diverse and unique wetland and its associated floodplain. As a result both the NSW and Federal Governments introduced 'buy back' programs and improved efficiency schemes in an effort to halt the ongoing destruction of the Macquarie Marshes. It must be remembered that these programs only returned a small portion of the water originally taken from the Macquarie Marshes and the landholders who depend on its health and vitality to make their living.

MMELA would like to make this submission to the Royal Commission investigating the Murray Darling basin plan. While we have been involved in the management and development of water sharing plans in the Macquarie for over 23 years the Basin plan development process has brought a whole lot of new challenges for our organisation. As we are a small group of landholders with a long history in involvement in water sharing we have been aware of the NSW governments agenda to continually favour the irrigation industry when water sharing decisions are being made. For many years we have tried to draw attention to this fact and are glad that through the airing of the ABC 4 corners that these concerns can now be investigated.

- As the Macquarie is a winter /spring fed catchment in the northern basin it provides a critical flow to the Barwon /Darling during a period when the Northern Rivers are likely to be experiencing low flow periods. For this reason alone we believe it is critical that the Macquarie be included in the investigation by the Royal Commission.

The following points are a summary of issues that have gone unrecognised by other investigations.

- Protection of environmental flows in the unregulated section of the Macquarie.
- Study into the dramatic reduction of flows reaching the Barwon/Darling from the Macquarie.
- Water resource plan development. Much of the structure that underpinned the previous Water sharing plan is being removed.
- Water resource plan, stake holder advisory panel is heavily bias towards the irrigation industry.
- Water resource plan development is rushed and the NSW government is only concerned about third party impacts to irrigators.
- MDBA failed to fund reporting and data collection in the Macquarie even though the Marshes have a Ramsar listed wetland that has had a 3.2 notification of change in ecological character.

Northern basin review was planning to remove water from the environment in the Macquarie without any research into the possible impact to the Ramsar listing of the Marshes

- Water reliability ,cap factor ,conversion factor and modelling assumption ,all term used to explain the available water .The MDBA have used these models to make assumptions while all river dependant community's know they are false and continue to decline.
- MDBA have not understood that there are other industry's are reliant on a healthy river system and ignored the production values of grazing sustainably on the floodplains or grazing after beneficial flooding as a result of environmental flows.
- The irrigation lobby groups given preferable treatment and water sharing plans being changed after community consultation has been the norm in the Macquarie Valley.
- It is particularly concerning to us that the past CEO of Macquarie River Food and Fibre (irrigation lobby group) was appointed to the board of the Basin Authority. Soon after, the Basin Authority claimed that the Macquarie was over recovered.
- The scientific evidence that the MDBA used to justify their claim of over recovery has all been based on models. The observed data (actual flows) during the life of the current water sharing plan has failed to meet the basin authority's own targets!! Our community has highlighted this fact for over 12 months and nothing has been done. The Royal Commission should investigate this fact.
- The allocating of flood plain harvesting entitlements to irrigators should also be investigated as it is likely that in some valleys the total extraction of water has increased due to the Basin Plan and this was not the intent.

- It is critical for the success of the Basin Plan that the Basin Authority have the respect of the whole community. The royal commission is an opportunity for the basin authority to regain some support from sections of the community other than the irrigation sector.
- The Macquarie Marshes are characterised by the intermittent and seasonal (ie inter-annual) transition between wet and terrestrial plant communities in response to variable flooding regimes. These plant communities exist as a complex mosaic in the landscape providing important refuge and breeding habitat for many different waterbirds, fish and frogs at any one time. We know that if the flooding regime is disturbed the change from wet to terrestrial plant communities becomes more permanent. Studies have found that plants that typically characterise wetlands on floodplains (e.g. perennial grasses and sedges) are vulnerable to dry periods because they lose resilience (i.e. the seedbank is depleted and/or vegetative propagules become inviable). With re-wetting these plant communities are therefore more likely to be replaced by terrestrial opportunistic annual species rather than wetland plant species (rolly polly and Bathurst burr). We know that droughts (multi-year dry periods) will become more common and protracted therefore increasing the time between floods and reducing flood frequency. We also know that river regulation has exacerbated the cumulative impacts of droughts. These facts will inevitably change the character of floodplain wetlands.
- Water NSW becoming more efficient has seen a dramatic reduction in surplus flows reaching the Marshes.
- DPI water restructure has seen the loss of local staff and compliance has suffered.
- Combine this with extremely dry periods with reduced inflows into the major storage dams has resulted in the environmental water management decisions being extremely cautious. With this caution comes some negative outcomes.

The basin plan was all about attempting to return to an environmentally sustainable level of extraction, the plan has failed to achieve this and in the Macquarie has resulted in the flows connecting with the Barwon /Darling continuing to reduce during the time of the Basin plan. The Northern basin review suggested that the Macquarie was in fact over recovered. This is totally incorrect as the decision to return water to the irrigation industry was made by the Authority with no thought of the environmental impacts this would have to the Ramsar listed Macquarie Marshes as well as the water that the Macquarie provides to the Barwon/Darling.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission.

Any further queries please contact.

Garry Hall

President MMELA