

Jason Modica Healthy Rivers Healthy Communities

From an environmental and river health viewpoint it is difficult to fathom how the Darling Rivers treatment has been able to go on for this length of time. Historically the River would dry inconsistently prior to the unbundling of water in the year 2000. The river last dried in 1945. Since 2000 there have been 15 cease to flow events in 17 years the longest being well over 500 days. This is clearly something other than a dry period. The pressures put on the lower Darling by illegal pumping and the gaming of the system up stream show a disconnect between what healthy rivers and communities are and the belief that a shared and monitored resource can be beneficial for all within the basin. The Federal Government and the MDBA's stance on cooperation with the South Australian Royal Commission suggests that there is something to hide behind all the Giggababble!

The power of the cotton lobby is of deep concern to all who are unable to access water they once did. Our region is deeply concerned by the Menindee lakes decommissioning and the pressures it will eventually place on the Murray Mallee and Mildura's well as South Australia. The WW to BH Pipeline which does not have a released business plan, also puts undue pressure on the Murray while keeping water in the upper reaches of that river for 1250 cotton growers who supply 3% of the worlds cotton. The dollar return on cotton compared to other crops is also quite small. The concept of growing cotton to send to third world countries to make \$2 T-shirts has a deeply predatory and hypocritical flavour.

There is also talk of the pipeline being utilised to get water to Mine sites well away from the rivers in the region. If this came into play it would be devastating for both Rivers. Groundwater and mining are an issue to but not at this forum. There has also been discussion within the community that their are mineral sands in the bottom of the decommissioned lakes.

The Tandou purchase of water too, shines a light on how water is a very political substance. It was purchased a 2.5 times its value through the Deputy Prime Minister's office and Tandou received one more years free water for one last cotton crop which was valued at \$35million this while the Darling was running Dry and farmers don stream were watching their livelihoods fade away

There have been opportunities to right the course, in light of experiences at Menindee and lower Darling (esp Northern Basin Review).

By reviewing one half of a system, while ignoring downstream impacts, and treating two rivers equally, although they have different sources (snow melt vs rainfall), there remains inequity and lack of whole of basin focus.

If the Menindee sdi goes ahead as planned, "expert ecologists" worry that golden perch may soon be on the threatened list too, given the Darling to Murray breeding pathway has been driving the Murray population of GP for the last two to three decades. Imagine that.... No native species left for anglers to Target unconditionally. There has been talk that the River between Wentworth and Wilcannia including Menindee is of such great importance it should be a National Park.

Also, 2 replacement appointments have been announced to the Board, approved by the Minister (Littleproud).

While Board appointments are subject to Ministerial approval, the MDBA remains a political operative, also subject to State and Federal political influence and control.

Constraints!!!

It would be a better outcome for the Murray Mallee region if money could be spent getting easements and raising roads etc in the central Murray so we can get more than 10,000ml per day past the barmah choke. Don't spend it all on Farmers infrastructure. If this is done you could start seeing 30,000-60,000ml or even more through the Murray every spring for a few weeks... Returning a heartbeat to the system and mimicking the natural pulse flows of the pre locked and weered rivers. This mimicking off natural flooding assist all native flora and Fauna to breed and create a healthier system around. Currently irrigators in central Murray stick to the barmah as a constraint argument which prevents bigger volumes coming through.

There are some key messages here we should spending money on dealing with key constraints to water delivery...

It benefits all river users and the environment. Don't spend it on Farmers efficiencies.... That seems to be a bandaid on a hemorrhage. Let's fix the real problems instead of giving more money to sectors that contributed to the problem in the first place.

Efficiencies and toolkit measures don't stack up & look like handouts in exchange for kickbacks an example is (Tandou just harvesting a bumper cotton crop while block banks being built along lower darling).

There are also concerns that SDLs do not stand up to scientific scrutiny and they are an expression of farming lobbyist who do not see true value in natural over bank flows and want to trade real water for engineering projects. I do not want to denounce SDL's but they must be heavily scrutinised for actual benefits not political trade offs.

We also need to consider our sign and agreed to international conventions being breached under MDB plan - Biodiversity & Ramsar - species including silver perch & murray cod now on endangered list. Where are the freshwater crays & turtles?

What can we achieve?

Under the Basin Plan the Government intends to address or 'relax' some of the most critical constraints – of which the Barmah choke and central Murray constraints are key in enabling greater flows through and downstream of the central Murray..

Estimates suggest that, if key constraints in the region are addressed, flows to the central Murray of up to 35,000 ML/day at Yarrawonga could be accommodated, limiting inundation to recognised floodway's (and still well below safe development approval heights which reflect the 1 in 100 year flood level). Flows at 35,000ML/.This would also provide with greater security regarding flooding of their land, intermittently boost farming productivity in low lying areas, and secure the value of farm land assets.

This will no doubt be expensive in dollar terms to negotiate easements and on ground structural works. However, the benefits to the enormous expanse of rivers and floodplains downstream could be monumental. Targets of >30,000 ML/day through the highly regulated lower Murray would provide both productivity and hydrodynamic benefits which are expected to substantially boost breeding and recruitment outcomes, and hence stocks of native fish.As a community, what are the questions we need to ask in regard to the future prosperity of the overall basin and our municipality? I have concerns about the health of the Darling River, which is dry again and has had 15 cease-to-flow events in 18 years, one lasting 520 days. How will this play out as water becomes more commodified? What pressure will it put on the Murray and Mildura. If water is going to be regulated by those with the deepest pockets, will the plight of the Darling be the Murray's lot eventually? Or a least a version of it. 2005 was a difficult year in Mildura, water entitlements went from 100% to around 40%, it was 10 years before confidence reappeared in our municipality. Despite being told "the market will sort this out" numerous times, I fear the opposite is clearly the case, and what was once a commodity that was bound to the land and production has now become a vehicle for speculation and speculators with political allies. I am interested in how each state interprets the MDBP rules, and the effects this is having on water for family farms and environmental water and overall river health. The Darling between Wentworth and Menindee is a fish highway, one of the few places in the Basin where natural flows can be replicated to build fish numbers which pulse back through a heavily locked and weired Murray. The importance of this stretch of the river is of National significance and should be earmarked for protection a Nation Park to protect the unique region would be beneficial. Of recent concern to me is the the shift of water from the Environment Portfolio to the Agriculture Portfolio when Malcolm Turnbull became PM in 2015. The recent exposure of some of the water deals from this point prove that there are some very serious questions to be asked. A Federal Royal Commission with full powers is the only answer to the murky waters which have left the Darling almost dead, and the Murray on the verge of over development.

The original volumes of water identified scientifically to bring the river system back to partial health was 3856GL and a river growing back to regulated full health was 6983GL. These numbers represent how much effort irrigation lobbyists have put into reducing what the Murray and Darling Rivers need for a healthy future. I will also add the uncontrolled development around the Junction of the two rivers, the Murray Mallee region has very different requirements

then the upper Darling and the GMID. These issues need to be identified, discussed and clearly considered for the future of our region and all river communities.

The other concerns I have are related to rules implemented in the MDBP, the six inch pipe limit has given farmers in the northern basin an opportunity to pump much larger volumes. The good neighbor policy of not pumping in low flow rivers was overturned and flood planning harvesting became the norm rather than a natural part of the wider riverine ecology. The Murray Darling Basin is a unique system of interconnected Rivers, creeks, streams and billabongs with rare flora and fauna. We should be more deeply concerned about its overall health.

This is about how we deal with a commodity which is being traded for profit at the expense of a community that we as council advocate for. I support our Senate to reconsider the intricacies of the MDBA plan and I also agree with the Scientists who published the Murray Darling Declaration.

It is hard to untangle water issues as upstream users square off against the downstream users, there are dozens of different water titles, environmental flows, good science and some very bad science, and there is corruption which is currently being investigated by ICAC. There are water buybacks which include \$39 million of empty buckets of water sold to the federal government during the millennium drought by what was then Tandou, followed by a further \$78 million allocated to the same station, now owned by Websters, for their 22,000 ML water right and for business re-adjustment. That's \$117 million of taxpayer funds to one station – the outcome - they have decommissioned the planned irrigated horticultural enterprise and turned the land to dry land farming taking all the promised jobs and economic activity with them to northern NSW where they get to intercept the water before it enters the Darling River, upstream most of the water controls and regulation. Except for this strange anomaly. Barnaby Joyce negotiated an arrangement so that, even though Tandou has no water, he's given them water for the 2017-18 season to grow a cotton crop valued at \$35 Million. Add this to the profit of \$37 Million we taxpayers paid for the water that we own, that Tandou/ Websters is now using and our gift to Websters (Read Mr Corrigan) seems to be rather large. Large enough perhaps for a Royal Commission. And the Darling nearby is running dry; it's virtually dead. Sadly, and there is evidence that this is linked, 17 aboriginal people in Wilcannia have committed suicide in the past 35 days.

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