

Murray River Action Group Inc.

Murray River Action Group submission to the Murray Darling Basin Royal Commission

The Murray River Action Group (MRAG) has been in existence for more than 40 years and represents the interests of riparian landholders and businesses on both sides of the Murray River between Hume Dam and Yarrowonga.

Our 200km stretch of the Murray river between Hume Dam and Yarrowonga is possibly the most studied inland waterway in Australia and has a regulated channel capacity of 25,000ML/day that the MDBA currently has an easement for. That is, an easement that allows the Authority to legally pass regulated flows over privately owned land, up to 25,000ML/day, and the Authority purchased that easement from landholders. These easements have only been in existence since late 2004. Before that time the Authority flooded private and public land with reckless abandon claiming it had the legal right to pass regulated flows over our business assets. We didn't necessarily believe that to be true however once we pushed for compensation for the damage that these regulated flows did to our pastures, land, infrastructure and businesses all of a sudden there was a mad rush from the MDBA to negotiate easements. We negotiated and consented to these easements not because of the relatively poor compensation we received but because it legitimised what had otherwise been an illegitimate practice and that it confirmed the limit on regulated releases of 25,000ML/day. The area that is subject to the easement has been mapped and recorded for future reference.

Back in 1977 in the face of increasing supply issues for consumptive water use the MDB Commission investigated what the maximum regulated channel capacity of this reach could be. It was then it was decided that if a number of block banks and levies were built then 25,000ML/day could be contained. 28,000ML/day was considered but found the works required to contain such a flow was unaffordable and probably unachievable. So even at 25,000ML/day many parts of the surrounding floodplain sit lower than the river height and is only protected from these flows by the Commission built banks and levies.

The proposed SDL adjustment process that is looking to relax constraints and raise regulated or environmental flows to 40,000ML/day in the Hume to Yarrowonga reach is not going to happen if we have any say in the matter. The Basin Plan and the 450GL of upwater seems to suggest that it is just a matter of changing the easements already in place from 25,000ML to 40,00ML. This could not be further from the truth. I will state from the outset that we will not agree to these flows, we have not been consulted and we have never seen the business case that proposed these flows. For starters there are over 300 bridges and causeways in this reach that allow access to the floodplain at flows of 25,000ML/day and were designed for flows of only that magnitude. 40,000ML flows would render virtually all of these structures useless, will inundate valuable pastures and crops and will make thousands of acres inaccessible and unmanageable. This will also magnify inundation and access issues for those downstream of Yarrowonga and compound their already significant problems.

There has never been any cost benefit analysis done that compares the supposed end of system benefits against the damage and costs that will occur in the upper reaches. Make no mistake 40,000ML/day flows will cause unnatural man-made flooding that will have a huge impact on riparian businesses. The Basin Plan has allowed \$200m to mitigate constraints – for the whole Basin. If these flows go ahead we reckon we will chew up that amount in this reach alone.

Both NSW and Victoria have stated that they will not support the 450GL of upwater unless it can be delivered without causing third party impacts or without those impacts being fully mitigated and we intend to hold those States to that position. We believe the Basin Plan's 2750GL target is probably unachievable without significant third party impacts and the 450GL of upwater has absolutely no chance of being delivered if it has to be delivered through the Hume to Yarrawonga reach. Hopefully common sense will soon prevail and outcomes will be judged by scientific and financial merit not political expediency. Delivery targets need to be adequately researched and approached carefully on the basis of what can actually be delivered in the real world and without third party impacts and any modelled outcomes need to clearly and transparently outline the assumptions that form the basis of those models. Until that happens, in our opinion, the Basin Plan will remain a shambles.

Our assertion that the Basin Plan will remain a shambles is based upon unrealistic and unachievable assumptions made in modelling for the Plan and in many of the reports that comment on the Plan. A glaring example is the recent Ernst and Young report which states 'Our report makes a number of observations and recommendations for moving forward. If adopted, and giving consideration to the identified risks, we believe the 450GL can be delivered with neutral or positive socio-economic impacts. We strongly advise a collaborative and united approach, to ensure communities and industries are an integral part of the ongoing journey'.

Essentially all the EY report says is that the recovery of 450GL through efficiency measures is possible, with a long (and doubtful) list of provisos, yet this report does not address constraints nor even consider constraints, and without removing constraints not one drop of this water can be delivered if there are to be no third party impacts. It appears to assume that any flows can happen at any time and at any height. We believe the cost involved in removing constraints would be astronomical and if looked at with a real world and pragmatic perspective would be indefensible. We can't believe that a report of this nature and cost hasn't addressed the fundamental issue of how this water if it is recovered will be delivered as a first priority, but in saying so, find this impracticality is unfortunately symptomatic of this whole debate and process.

Richard Sargood
Chair/President

NSW

Marie Dunn
Honorary Secretary

NSW