

Socio-Economic Assessment of Murray-Darling Basin Submission Template

Submission Number 024

1. What organisation (if relevant) are you from?

██████████

2. Please enter your first name

██████

3. Please enter your email

████████████████████

Bring communities back to the heart of conversations and action that decide their future

This section encompasses the following categories:

- Governments must rebuild community trust in water reform, and lead from the front
- Current funding is not enough to support community led transitions for Basin communities impacted by water reform
- Socioeconomic neutrality criteria should be accompanied by a process to provide flexibility for communities to move to less water dependent futures where communities request this

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the Panel's key findings and recommendations, and why? Please provide as much detail as possible.

I don't agree with recommendation 2 proposing slowing of water recovery. Many previous reviews have identified over allocation of water licences or entitlements and it is this over allocation that has caused the current ecological disaster and damage to the cultural and spiritual lives of indigenous peoples. I consider water recovery should be accelerated, and large holders in upstream areas should bear the heaviest burden of this. Slowing water recovery is the wrong approach.

5. Are there any significant gaps? What are we missing?

The recommendations talk about Commonwealth investment in rural communities affected by the basin plan. There are quite a few misconceptions about the causes of economic decline in rural communities - many small communities have disappeared over the last 50 years because motor vehicle transportation for example has rendered general stores redundant. Large scale rationalisation of the rail industry in NSW and in Victoria had big costs in terms of lost employment and state governments did not have any alternative investment strategies to keep some smaller communities viable. In NSW, the government has a policy to concentrate services in hubs, for example in the Riverina by concentrating health and other government services in Wagga, Griffith and Albury. Such population centralisation policies will inevitably lead to the decline of smaller towns regardless of what impact water policies have. Moreover, climate change is causing the drying out of the basin, as noted in the CEO's recent report about declining inflows. It is no use pretending these things are not real. It is appalling to see communities like Menindee, Pooncarie, and Louth run out of water. It is appalling the destruction wrought at Menindee by over allocation of water upstream - 20 years ago that town was an oasis and now it is a graveyard of dead vines and dead hopes.

6. If implemented, do you think our recommendations would make a difference or have a benefit to you and/or your community?

Slowing the recovery of water from big irrigation interests will be of no benefit to many communities, notwithstanding that many may hold the contrary belief. Assuming that economic loss to communities can be quantified, then a commensurate investment in new projects and industries, supported by adequate infrastructure could compensate for it. The communities themselves should have an important role in determining what new industries and community development programs would be worthwhile pursuing.

Meet the pressing needs of First Nations

This section encompasses the following categories:

- More needs to be done to improve social, cultural and economic outcomes for First Nations communities
7. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the Panel's key findings and recommendations, and why? Please provide as much detail as possible.
I agree with the Panel's recommendations 9, 10 and 11. However the fact is that in areas like along the Darling below Bourke river flows are now only intermittent, and the construction of the Wentworth to Broken Hill pipeline sent a clear signal that as far as the NSW government was concerned, the Darling River ends in Bourke, in all but exceptional cases. Restoring flows to the river is the only acceptable outcome and the only way in which it will be possible to implement these recommendations. Moreover, indigenous communities should be recognised as experts themselves - their extensive historical knowledge of river flows and ecology should be accepted at face value, without second guessing by others.
 8. Are there any significant gaps? What are we missing?
The system of water trading and markets should be abandoned and replaced with another system the objective of which is to ensure as far as possible that riverine communities do not run out of water, and that large corporate interests do not exclusively benefit from the trading arrangements as they do at present. The Commonwealth has wasted vast sums of money on buying back water - such as under the Webster Ltd buyback in respect of its Lake Tandou cotton operation at Menindee. That corporation made a one off profit of \$36m from the transaction, as it announced to the ASX in 2017. Yet for small operators like the Lower Darling Horticulture Group, getting financial recompense for the destruction of their business has been like trying to extract blood from a stone. Another serious policy issue is whether the use of large scale water storages on private property and huge pumping operations represent the reasonable use of rivers for irrigation purposes as contemplated in section 100 of the Constitution. I do not consider such operations do represent a reasonable use of rivers. Perhaps there is a case for a new constitutional arrangement that provides for water security for riverine communities, to the extent that can reasonably be maintained in a drying environment. The current system is clearly failing in this respect.
 9. If implemented, do you think our recommendations would make a difference or have a benefit to you and/or your community?
I have nothing to add to my previous comments.

Implement water reform with greater care so potential harms are minimised

This section encompasses the following categories:

- From this point on, governments should match the pace of all further water recovery to the capacity of systems and communities to absorb and adjust change
- Basin communities need greater clarity around river operations
- The quality, timeliness and awareness of indicators related to wellbeing and the environment need to be better
- Research and innovation need more focus on helping farm businesses transition to flexible farming systems
- Moving towards more sustainable irrigation infrastructure

10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the Panel's key findings and recommendations, and why? Please provide as much detail as possible.

It needs to be remembered that water buy backs are voluntary transactions, not compulsory acquisitions. If the pace of water recovery is slowed, or the recovery targets are not achieved or a diluted, the ecology of the basin will continue to deteriorate. This is abundantly clear from the many previous scientific reports, including the relatively recent ones by Vertessy and the Australian Academy of Science. Moreover, the Commonwealth in acting the Water Act 2007 relied extensively on the external affairs power in the Constitution, hence the concern of that Act with the preservation of wetlands and the like. I don't agree with the proposition that socio economic interests are of similar weight to environmental interests for the reasons explored in the report of the South Australian Royal Commission on the MDB.

11. Are there any significant gaps? What are we missing?

[See previous comments](#)

12. If implemented, do you think our recommendations would make a difference or have a benefit to you and/or your community?

[See previous comments](#)

Support the capacity of communities to adapt to change

This section encompasses the following categories:

- Basin communities need greater clarity around river operations
- The quality, timeliness and awareness of indicators related to wellbeing and the environment need to be better
- The Australia Government needs to further invest in regional connectivity in the Basin

13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the Panel's key findings and recommendations, and why? Please provide as much detail as possible.

We need to move to recycling of effluent into potable water. This is commonly done in Europe. There should be no ifs or buts or repeats of the Toowoomba plebiscite proposal in respect of these sorts of proposals, they should just be implemented. Also, where possible, people should be encouraged to move to composting toilets, and all public toilet facilities should be converted into composting units. There seems to be a bit of a rush to sink bores - it needs to be remembered that aquifers can be overexploited and run dry, as appears to be happening in the rural areas outside Darwin, and at places like Ti Tree in the Northern Territory where excessive horticulture plantings have diminished aquifers. Similar problems are being encountered in

Perth, although the desalination facilities have offset to some extent the demand on aquifers in that state.

14. Are there any significant gaps? What are we missing?

[See above](#)

15. If implemented, do you think our recommendations would make a difference or have a benefit to you and/or your community?

[See above](#)

Address critical and urgent gaps in wellbeing, infrastructure and services

This section encompasses the following categories:

- The Australian Government needs to further invest in regional connectivity in the Basin
- Basin regions and towns facing acute social and economic issues needs immediate support

16. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the Panel's key findings and recommendations, and why? Please provide as much detail as possible.

[In some cases, it may be necessary to provide support for people to relocate to areas where towns are no longer viable because of the absence of water. There was an interesting feature in the Guardian newspaper about the plight of Euchareena, and also a discussion on Landline about Giralambone, both places having run out of water. We are familiar with the issues in Walgett and other communities that have suffered owing to unsustainable irrigation practices. We need to bite the bullet and decide whether we want to pursue silly growth targets like those proposed by the National Farmers Federation for export of rural produce, or to recognise the reality that in the face of climate change our production targets should be capped or in some cases reduced. There is nothing unreasonable about this - there can be no endless growth where there are limited resources.](#)

17. Are there any significant gaps? What are we missing?

[See other comments](#)

18. If implemented, do you think our recommendations would make a difference or have a benefit to you and/or your community?

[See other comments](#)