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SUBMISSION TO THE INDEPENDENT PANEL
ON
THE INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC
CONDITIONS IN THE BASIN DRAFT REPORT

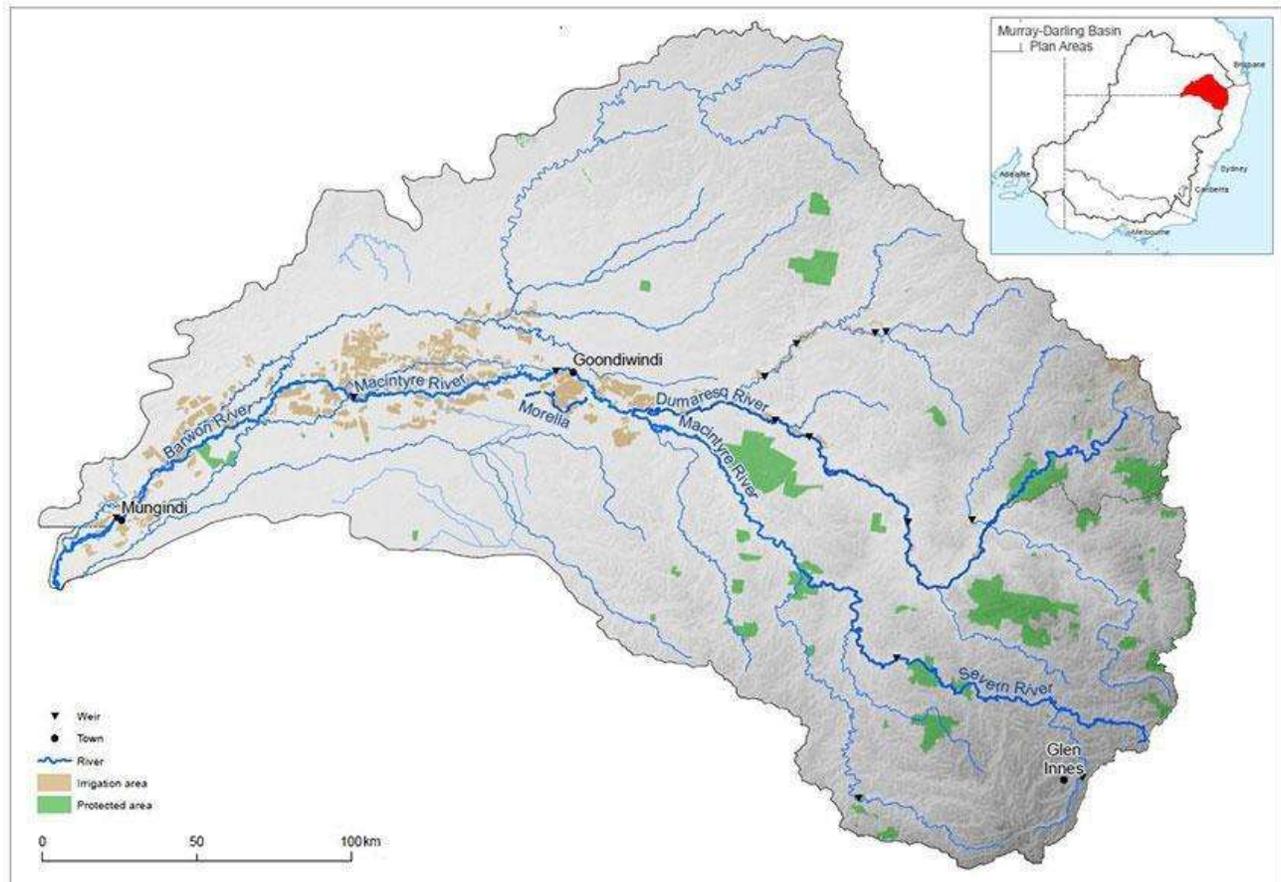
SUBMISSION DUE BY 5PM TUESDAY APRIL 7TH 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Border Rivers Food and Fibre (BRFF) represents the water users and entitlement-holders of the Border Rivers region of southern Queensland and northern New South Wales. These water-users responsibly utilise the water resources of the Macintyre Brook, the Dumaresq, Macintyre, Severn, Weir and Barwon River systems and the Eastern Recharge Zone of the Great Artesian Basin. Production from irrigated agriculture includes vegetables, nuts, dairy, citrus, wine-grapes, herbs, stone-fruit, hay, cereals, coarse grains and cotton. Irrigated agriculture contributes nearly \$1 Billion (farm gate) to the local economy in good years.



This document represents the views of the members of BRFF, though individuals are entitled to their own views relating to their own circumstances.

BRFF is also a member of the NSW Irrigators Council and National Irrigators Council. Whilst generally endorsing their views, we maintain the right to hold independent positions when appropriate.

GENERAL COMMENTS

We strongly support the thrust of the panel's report that engagement must be done far more effectively than has been the case to date. Particularly at the beginning of the Basin Plan process, the Commonwealth approach was very much 'top-down' directing what would happen with very little, if any, notice taken of local input. It was clear that they knew best.

The genesis of the problem for regional communities has come from the very basis of the Basin Water Reforms and the Commonwealth Water Act 2007 where the environmental factors are clearly given priority - **"..the Act mentions the environment 266 times, sustainability 68 times, irrigated agriculture 6 times and agriculture once."** Mike Taylor MDBA Chair 2010.

While we think it is unrealistic to expect a re-writing of the Water Act at this point, there is certainly scope for the approach to be more broadly adopted within both the Commonwealth and State's management of the Basin's natural, economic and human assets.

We are glad to see evidence of a change in approach with the initiation of this Independent Panel study into these previously secondary factors.

We generally advocate the wholistic management of natural resources where environment, economy and social/cultural factors can only be managed with equal priority, as 3 legs of the stool. If you neglect any one of them, the stool cannot stand.

We have always held the view that there is no good reason why 'environmental capital' must be restored at the expense of existing social and economic capital, particularly when other alternatives exist, but remain unexplored.

We submit that the over-arching impact of the recent drought has been under-played in the Draft Report. Looking at the last 20 years of climatic records, they have been the driest 2 decades, interrupted by a smaller than usual of wet and 'normal' years. Individuals, businesses and communities are already suffering severe stress from the drought on its own, which only compounds the stress resulting from massive change resulting from water reforms. Communities can accept a natural drought, but they cannot accept a 'government-induced' drought being implemented on top of it. Drought impacts reveal stresses and problems that don't exist the other 90% of the time and current problems must be viewed through the lens of compounding stress factors.

We are conscious that some communities might blame water reforms for their current stress when there may be other under-lying factors to blame. We are also conscious that stressed communities are less inclined to participate and contribute positively to broad discussions.

The history of water reforms show that they only ever occur after a severe drought and people are reminded of the value of the precious resource. It is time for the knee-jerk responses to end and for existing plans to be allowed to work as has been promised.

All governments must also remember that the Basin Plan was never meant to drought-proof 'the environment'. No plan, State or Federal, is capable of doing that, but attempts to do so can cause significant damage to small communities without achieving their aims.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 1

We agree strongly that the constant churn of plans, inquiries must cease at all levels and that communities be allowed to come to terms with their current situations and to recover from the drought.

We require **consistency and stability** from all levels of government and a commitment to “do no harm”. Where impacts are caused, they must be equitably mitigated.

Water markets must be made simpler for all users to prevent the exploitation of unwitting participants apparently occurring in some markets.

There is undoubtedly a lack of quality leadership in some quarters. Good outcomes are impossible without respectful and honourable discussion amongst all representatives and there is no place for abuse, fabrication or deceit. Where that occurs, it must be called out and alternatives sought.

Capacity building is supported as a long-term measure.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 2

Given the current level of recovery at approximately 2100GL out of 2750GL, a commitment from the Federal Minister, backed by the Ministerial Council that no more water will be recovered from farmers would help reduce uncertainty.

The remaining 650GL must be recovered from SDLAM projects and complimentary measures offsets. This will avoid the additional recovery from farmers with resulting flow-on impacts to communities.

The timing for the additional 650GL could be extended to allow the states to properly develop their proposed projects and to more fully explore the benefits of complimentary measures to achieve ecological outcomes without further recovery.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 3

Economic Development (ED) funding has historically been patchy and politically driven, though producing valuable outcomes in enough cases to warrant long-term continuation. Only some communities have sufficient human and economic capacity to deliver outcomes required so will need additional assistance. It would be preferred that programs are community lead, where that is possible.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 4

Agree that those most impacted should receive priority in ED funding.

It would help overall outcomes if the ED projects were also linked to landscape management outcomes (eg. Landcare) and utilising local indigenous communities. There was an excellent example run by the Murray CMA under the direction of Dr John Connalin that would provide an excellent base to start from.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 5

The 'Upwater' option is fast becoming unachievable in the current timeframes, so these need to be pushed out to 2030 at least. Extended time will allow proper consideration and planning for these projects to then be considered and delivered without impacting negatively on local communities.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 6

Delivery constraints are primarily a southern basin matter and we would support an outcomes-based approach that delivers improved operational results for irrigators.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7

We strongly support the upgrading of all town water-supplies to make them as secure as possible to drought-proof them in the long-term.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 8

As for 7

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 9

We would strongly support the long-term engagement of First Nations people to deliver ecosystem outcomes in partnership with relevant government agencies.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 10

As for 9

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 11

We support the continued participation of First Nations people in water planning processes.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 12

We would strongly support realistic steps to regularly 'take the temperature' of regional communities, provided that it is done with a long-term commitment, looks across local, state and federal government areas of responsibility. This needs to extend to the small communities and not just regional centres and look at all three factors - economic, ecological and social. The better information that this can generate and build historically, the more informed government decisions can become, resulting in better, longer-term outcomes.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 13

Given the specialisation required for interactions with First Nations, a specific program monitoring their social and economic conditions should be done in any case. There are many other more important factors, aside from water reform, that make this a necessity.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 14

Strongly support monitoring and evaluation of environmental outcomes but it should cover all measures of improving outcomes, not just water reform. It would obviously serve an important role in many cases, but will not be the only factor, so all factors impacting on environmental outcomes should be studied so that all solutions can be considered, not just water reforms alone. This is the mistake that has been made to date with the singular, myopic, view of environmental outcomes that are seeking to be fixed with only the use of the 'water reform tool'. No amount of water will fix a problem caused by feral fish or by livestock in wetlands, for example. All the results listed are very important, but the tools available for landscape managers must be broader.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 15

We strongly support the expanded support of ag research and innovation.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 16

We strongly support addressing the 'digital drought' disadvantage felt in many of our regions, recognising that families living on remote properties are no less deserving of the capacity to communicate, be educated and conduct business in the same way as someone closer to the coast. If the current COVID-19 restrictions have taught us anything, it is that this capacity is indispensable in the 21st century.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 17

As for 16

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 18

Not relevant to the Border Rivers, but we would agree in principle.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 19

The need for these services is unquestioned and we support the prioritisation to areas most in need.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 20

We would support a basin-wide initiative to this effect if it has a long-term timeframe.

We would be reluctant to see another agency or authority created that will only have a lifespan of the current government.

The alternative of adding this responsibility to the existing MDBA, under a specialist division, seems more efficient in that the MDBA already has the contacts and relationships in place to commence the work. A new body would need to start from square 1.

It will need to be resourced by government for the long-term and involve local, state and federal governments as well as any other interested local organisations who could help in the task.

We would advocate the requirement for improved social, economic AND environmental outcomes from such a process. We would like to see linkages into Landcare and other environmental management programs engaging with landowners and managers to plan and deliver environmental programs, a combination of private and public bodies providing economic advice, training and education services to regional communities. Specialist social work bodies could be seconded to the MDBA to provide targeted help where most required. There could be opportunities for universities to play a role across economic, environmental and social sectors.

A phased approach should target the most acute cases firstly, then progressively expanding, applying the experience gained from first cases as they go.

As for Recommendation 14, monitoring and evaluation of the programs must be consistent and long-term to ensure value-for-money outcomes from the public investment.