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Submission to the Inquiry into the Management, Governance and Use of Environmental Water in Victoria.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to the Inquiry into the Management, Governance and Use of Environmental Water in Victoria.

About MLDRIN

The Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) is a confederation of Sovereign First Nations from the Southern part of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB). The group currently includes Delegates from 24 Nations across Victoria, NSW, the ACT and South Australia.

Our core work includes:

- Advising the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) on all matters relevant to Traditional Owners and Aboriginal people in the Southern Murray Darling Basin, in particular, the implementation of the Basin Plan
- Undertaking projects and having an active role in Natural Resource Management and water planning
- Providing a forum for our member Nations to keep informed, deliberate on issues and provide feedback and advice to decision makers across all levels of government
- Advocating for our member Nations' rights and interests in land and water, specifically to progress the recognition of Aboriginal water rights and Cultural Flows
- Providing leadership and capacity building for our member nations

The VEW and Environmental Water

Adequate holdings and appropriate management of environmental water are essential to sustain the health of water-dependent ecosystems and to support community, recreational and Aboriginal cultural values. Environmental water management can service a range of social and cultural outcomes that deliver tangible benefits to regional communities and economies, as well as sustaining the health of water-dependent ecological assets.

MLDRIN, and other Traditional Owner organizations across Victoria, recognise the positive outcomes that are being achieved through

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environmental water management. MLDRIN and other member Nation organisations engage regularly with the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) and other regional agencies involved in water planning and delivery. In many cases, this engagement has contributed to successful watering events and positive outcomes for Traditional Owners. Some examples of positive partnerships include:

- Environmental Flow releases on the Glenelg River
 - Following a partnership and research by Glenelg CMA and local Aboriginal organisations, water releases from Docklands Reservoir between 21st February and 1st March 2017 aimed to improve river health and reduce salinity, at the same time as helping to sustain the health of Country for Traditional Owners.
 - The timing of the environmental flow was planned to coincide with the March long-weekend, freshening water quality for native plants and animals and improving usability and amenity for river users, including attendees at the Johnny Mullagh Cricket Competition - an annual event that recognizes the first all-Aboriginal cricket team which toured internationally in the 1800s.
- Environmental watering and Monitoring in Gunbower Forest
 - The Barapa Water for Country project is partnership project between the North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA) and Barapa Barapa Traditional Owners. The project centres around Barapa Cultural Team members identifying, mapping and recording the cultural values of the Lower Gunbower Forest to improve the management of environmental water. Environmental water releases can be adjusted to achieve improved outcomes for this significant Ramsar-listed wetland, as well as supporting cultural outcomes.
- Environmental watering in Barmah Forest
 - The VEWH and Goulburn Broken CMA engage with Yorta Yorta Nations Aboriginal Corporation regarding the delivery of environmental flows into the Barmah National Park, Australia's largest Red-Gum forest. Environmental flows help to sustain the health of these iconic and culturally significant forests, as well as providing opportunities for Traditional Owners to participate in management and undertake monitoring of outcomes for endangered species. The Long-necked turtle, a culturally significant species to the Yorta Yorta people, also benefits from environmental watering in Barmah forest.

Blackwater

Traditional Owners successfully managed waterways and water dependent ecosystems across Victoria for many millennia. Aboriginal land use practices were adapted to capitalize on the natural cycles of Victoria's variable inland river systems. It is these natural cycles that underpin the survival of iconic species and ecosystems such as River Red Gum forests and the endangered Murray Cod.

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River regulation and water extraction have fundamentally altered the hydrology of many of Victoria's rivers. These interventions, resulting in less frequent flooding, modified cycles of wetting and drying and build up of organic matter in floodplain ecosystems, are the key driver of dangerous blackwater events. Environmental water management can be deployed to minimize the incidence and impact of blackwater events, by removing organic matter from floodplains. However, environmental water, in and of itself, is not a primary cause blackwater events.

Efficiency

Manipulation of environmental water through infrastructure, such as 'supply measures' being developed as part of the SDL Adjustment Mechanism in the Southern Murray Darling Basin, can never function as an effective substitute for water recovery and adequate flows that connect river channels to floodplains and associated ecological assets. 'Efficient' use of environmental water must not be pursued as a substitute for real water recovery and an adequate portfolio of held environmental water.

The use of floodplain infrastructure to maximize the 'efficiency' of environmental water delivery comes with a range of risks and potential impacts.¹ Amongst these are impacts on Aboriginal cultural heritage values, as evidenced by major disturbance to burial sites during construction of the Koondrook-Perricoota Flood Enhancement Works in NSW. Such impacts are tangible constraints to the deployment of 'supply measures' and other associated infrastructure projects.

MLDRIN strongly believes that an approach focused on achieving 'efficiency' through floodplain infrastructure risks replicating the very same problems that environmental water management is intended to address: namely the impacts of regulation, modification and exploitation of water resources. Floodplain infrastructure is costly and creates an ongoing cost to taxpayers through deterioration and maintenance work. Finally, its efficacy as a means to achieve environmental outcomes is largely unproven.

MLDRIN would be happy to elaborate on any of these points at a public hearing.

Yours sincerely,



Rene Woods
Chairperson, MLDRIN

¹ Bond, N. *et al.* 'Ecological risks and opportunities from engineered artificial flooding as a means of achieving environmental flow objectives,' *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 2014; 12(7): 386–394