

The Problems

The current Murray Darling Basin Plan has failed farmers, rural and regional communities, consumers and the environment. It has failed fundamentally, systemically, morally, ecologically and economically. The MDBP was drawn up using neoliberal policies (economic rationalism) whereby the dollar ruled and all lateral thinking and common sense jettisoned. The plan that was conceived by neoliberals during the Big Dry, 13 years of drought from 1997 – 2009 inclusive, is irrational and unworkable.

The current Murray Darling Basin Plan is:

- not in the interests of farmers and rural and regional communities;
- environmentally and ecologically unsustainable and dangerous;
- economically and socially unviable and heartbreaking.

Farmers, associated industries and communities who have been supplying clean and green food and fibre to consumers for over a century have been cast adrift under the current top down plan. Farmers are business people and like all business people they need to be able to plan ahead. Under the current Plan they are unable to do so as they don't know how much water is going to be available to them at any given time. Farmers have become beggars, industries have downsized or shut down and communities morph into ghost towns as water is sold to the highest bidder or taken for "environmental water"! Cockies unable to go on then sell their farm and water and the cycle repeats ad infinitum.

Environmentally the MDBP has been a disaster! While a few more lagoons and trees may have received some water under the environmental flows, blackwater (hypoxia)² and blue green algae (cyanobacteria)³⁴ events have become more prevalent. While both types of events occur naturally, both hypoxia and cyanobacteria need high levels of nutrients in the water and the prevalence of these events suggests that nutrient levels are excessive. Another disaster which beset the Basin recently was that the Darling River stopped flowing for the best part of 12 months.



² - CSIRO – Short-term effects of a prolonged blackwater event... – King, Tonkin & Lieshcke

³ - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyanobacteria>

⁴ - <http://www.environment.gov.au/water/quality/publications/factsheet-blue-green-algae-cyanobacteria-and-water-quality>

The sources of these nutrients are many and varied from farm run-off from the overuse of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides, industrial waste, waste water treatment plant discharge⁵, sodicity⁶ and salinity. All of these pollutants are treatable and/or manageable and should not be discharged in the streams of the Murray Darling Basin. Farm run-off is now kept to a minimum via the implementation of on-farm water recycling systems, industrial run-off could also be managed better than it is currently, WWTP discharge needs to be eliminated altogether, salinity is manageable, however, sodicity remains a very real problem. With a third of the Australian landscape affected by sodic soils as opposed to 5% affected by salinity, we need to have an upfront conversation on how to deal with the problem. All of the above problems cause the eutrophication or turbidity of streams and weirs in the Basin thus causing the build up of nutrients.

Another cause of nutrient build-up much to the angst of farmers, tourists, fishermen alike are the constant flow changes which wash sediment into the streams and is the primary cause of bank erosion. While the environmental water does assist with flushing streams of the MDB it can also damage already degraded waterways. This can especially be the case when these flows occur outside of the winter/spring flood period. The reversal of flows for irrigation purposes is bad enough (high flows during summer and low in winter unless there are floods), but so-called environmental flows in summer are only making a degraded biota worse.



What to do

With the current Plan unworkable, attempts to alter the Plan may make some improvements or, on the other hand, they could make it worse, much worse. The only feasible option is start again using the experience of this failure to get it right!! The Murray Darling Basin Plan should, unlike the current top-down version, be a by the people for the people using a bottom-up approach.

The Plan should be formulated by farmers, business people from the associated industries, community leaders, hydrogeologists, first nations people and water authorities. That is people who know and work with water, know what they want, know what to do and what not to, know how to do it and know that at the end of the day the benefits will go to those who have put in an honest effort. Unlike the current Plan which rewards the affluent speculators at the expense of the workers.

⁵ - <http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/business-and-industry/guidelines/water-guidance/wastewater-discharges-to-waterways>

⁶ - http://vro.agriculture.vic.gov.au/dpi/vro/vrosite/nsf/pages/sodic_soils

The Short Term (2 years)

While a planning team is being assembled and inaugurated the current Plan should be maintained until the findings of the planning team are brought to fruition in the medium term. During this time an extensive study into the quality of water in the basin can be undertaken. Monitoring of water quality needs to be implemented over the Basin on a regular basis and be made public via the local media. An extensive study of the hydrogeology of the Basin also needs to be instigated as does a study of sodic soils within the MDB. This study then needs to be overlaid against those of salinised soils to gain a thorough understanding of the problems we're facing.

Water trading in its current guise needs to be stopped immediately! Maximum prices for water need to be set annually for example (using Victoria Goulburn Zone 1): water right - \$500/Ml, sales - \$200/Ml and off-quota sales - \$100. All other trading will be discontinued. Only land owners, associated industries and government instruments will be able to participate in water trading. Non-landowners apart from allocations to associated industries and government departments, who have water entitlements will have 12 months to dispose of their entitlements at the above prices. The price of water for farmers must represent money for value i.e. cockies must be able to get a return for their money on the culture they are irrigating.

All positions on the Murray Darling Basin Authority will be made vacant and a board of directors and chief executive will be elected by farmers, associated business, MDB communities and water authorities. In the interim business of the MDBA will be transacted by current staff overseen by Basin water authorities.



The Medium Term (5 years)

With the new Murray Darling Basin Authority in place the Basin Plan will be simplistic and written in plain English so as there can be no misunderstanding of any of the rules and regulations within the Plan. The current Plan is a layman's nightmare and a lawyer's paradise. Full understanding by everybody of the Basin Plan is paramount to the success and efficient operation of the Plan.

The gravitational irrigation systems constructed across the nation were underpinned by their simplicity and cost effectiveness. Construction of the schemes was by manual labour with horse and cart and mostly of local materials all of which kept the cost of construction down. The systems' efficiency was outstanding and required only gravity and man power to make it work. This is most unlike modern irrigation systems (including those that are or have been remodelled) which cost and arm and a leg to construct with materials which are transported from across the country.

In keeping with *KISS* method the Plan has been reduced to 6 components:

1. Basic Water Resources including quality control
2. Water Allocation
3. Management and Distribution
4. Water Trading
5. Environmental Flows
6. Basin Plan Review & Update, Research & Development

Basic Water Resources: is the management and maintenance of the catchments, waterways, storages and wetlands within the Basin. Responsibilities include water quality, the health of the biota, managing sodicity, salinity & acidity of the catchment, farm, industry & WWTPs, managing all other forms of pollution and to provide an advisory service to tourism and emergency services.



Water Allocation: will establish a register of lands including irrigation districts in which permanent water (water right and sales) at a set rate depending on the soil type/use and intended culture to be grown. As I have alluded to earlier, the only people that will be able to possess water entitlements will be land owners (farmers, food & fibre processing industries, government (federal, state and local) departments and the environmental water trust. Permanent allocations include groundwater as it currently stands. They will be responsible for seasonal allocations which work on the principle of securing 2 years of water right before any sales can be allocated in each district. WA will also set the fee for the cost of water annually per district. All fees (service, drainage, managerial, structural and the like) will be built into the cost of water.

Management & Distribution: The management and distribution of water will continue in the medium term by those who have that currently have that onus. Contrary to current practice water entitlement holders will be treated as customers and M&D will honour that with due diligence. M&D will endeavour to improve service levels and efficiency of delivery will be monitored publicly. In the longer term M&D will totally restructured from a top-down neoliberal enterprise to become a irrigator friendly bottom-up business. M&D will be responsible for maintaining and upgrading of the irrigation system, research and development into irrigation systems and practices.

Water Trading: With water entitlements now only allocated to irrigators, associated industries and government instrumentalities water may be traded by those entities within a particular district to those within that district. If environmental water becomes “free” within any particular district that water also may be traded within the district. Outside speculators will not be permitted. Rules and regulations concerning water trading will be simplified unlike the current regulations.

Environmental Water Trust: Rules and regulations concerning environmental flows will be inaugurated under the EWT. Three types of flows will prevail: subsistence flows, base flows and high pulse flows. Subsistence flows will be evident during winter and/or up until the irrigation season commences/finishes. Base flows will prevail during the irrigation season. High Pulse flows will be evidenced during times of dry winters and springs to flush the river/s. If water held for this purpose is not required, it will be deemed *free* and traded as sales water.

Basin Plan Review and Update: The Murray Darling Basin Plan will be continually under review to improve all of the above facets of the Plan. A research and development program will be set up to work with agricultural industries to explore ways of improving all aspects of water management. An independent Review and Update team will work hand in hand with stakeholders and the MDBA board in a bid to improve efficiency of operation, revive and reinvigorate the biota, to grow clean and green food and fibre within the Basin and energise and harmonise farmers, industries and communities alike throughout the region.



The Long Term (8> years)

After 7 years of operation the Basin Plan we will be able to start setting some long term goals with agriculture as an industry with improved research and development from within the Plan and without by Federal and State Governments. The result will be a vastly healthier catchment where storages, waterways and wetlands have become rich and thriving under the Plan and featuring ecotourism. Farmers will have peace of mind when it comes to irrigation issues, industry that is profitable, a happy and vibrant community and consumers who can put their faith in the clean and green food and fibre grown in the Murray Darling Basin.

Conclusion

The Murray Darling Basin Plan is a fraud concocted and perpetuated by governments, bureaucrats and big business on rural and regional Australia. Divorcing water from the land making farmers, first nations people and rural and regional businesses poorer while corporate and wealthy elites take the cream is hardly rates with the Australian idealism of a fair go!

With more water in the hands of the filthy rich, big business and government, rural and regional Australia is going to suffer. And suffer they do!! As I said previously the Murray Darling Basin Plan is a neoliberal market based solution to a real world problem. It hasn't worked, it isn't and never will. It hasn't addressed any of the problems that were identified to make the system more equitable to all stakeholders and to be of benefit to the environment.

The Plan has failed to rectify systemic corruption (via illegal diversions and extremely poor legislation) by State Governments, bureaucrats and irrigators that has been endemic for 100 years. It has threatened the livelihoods of hundreds of farmer, small businesses and towns within the Basin. More water right was sold than there was water in the biggest scam in rural and regional Australia. The water in the Basin is still polluted and probably getting worse and the Murray River still can't run into the sea!

The health of the Murray Darling Basin is wholly predicated by water quality within the system. With increasing blackwater and blue-green algae events, water quality is deteriorating across the board. The so-called environmental flows are used to cover waste water and other discharges into the system which is a lose, lose for all stakeholders!!

The Plan must be a bottom-up exercise with the impetus coming from local communities, farmers and associated industry with assistance coming from all 3 levels of government. The plan will by the people for the people, will revive and reinvigorate agriculture, tourism including eco-tourism, indigenous communities, the environment, the economy and all Australians.

John Bentley