

SUBMISSION 38
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admin@mda.asn.au
www.mda.asn.au
T (03) 5480 3805
ABN: 64 636 490 493

463 High Street
P.O. Box 1268
Echuca, Vic 3564

3rd Floor, 553 Kiewa Street
P.O. Box 359
Albury, NSW 2640

30/08/2017

The Executive Officer
Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

To the Executive Officer,

This is a submission from the Murray Darling Association (MDA) to the Inquiry into the Management, Governance and Use of Environmental Water, being conducted by the Victorian Parliament's Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee.

The Murray Darling Association is the peak body for local government across the Murray-Darling Basin, with close to 100 member councils. The allocation and delivery of environmental water is a matter that is of significant interest to local government.

The Committee has called for submissions that offer policy solutions to four key issues. Broadly, the Murray Darling Association believes greater consultation with local government is required on all four issues.

1. The role of environmental water in blackwater events.

Environmental water is essential to the health, wellbeing and sustainability of the Murray-Darling Basin system and the communities within it.

MDA member councils broadly acknowledge the numerous benefits of environmental water to land and water ecosystems, and support the legislation that ensures provision of such volumes of water as may be sufficient to maintain the health of that environment.

Councils also recognise that blackwater is a natural feature of Australian river systems and occurs when there is flooding in areas with a large build-up of organic material. Such a natural event was seen in late 2016, when high rivers caused inundation of forest areas rarely flooded.

It is also recognised that a lack of environmental flows can exacerbate blackwater events, so regular environmental watering can, in some instances assist in reducing the incidents of blackwater events.

Some member councils have also noted concern that environmental water may in some instances contribute to, or exacerbate the effects of blackwater events in some areas.

The impacts of environmental watering events are complex and differ from wetland to wetland.

The MDA acknowledges the importance of the role of the CEWO and the VEWH in administering complex and essential legislation. The MDA and its member councils have always valued a constructive and inclusive relationship with these departments. The MDA also acknowledges that environmental watering is well informed by local land services, catchment management authorities and CEWO local engagement officers.

The MDA is of the position that environmental watering could be further informed by local government through the MDA. Such local knowledge – informed by decades of observations and experience – is essential in ameliorating the incidence and impacts of blackwater events.

Additionally, inclusion of local government through the MDA – along with local land services, catchment management authorities and CEWO local engagement officers - in the planning for environmental watering invites greater public confidence in environmental watering.

Environmental watering absolutely must consider local knowledge as the best way of avoiding unintended consequences inherent in blackwater events, including the proliferation of carp spawning, and any potential corollary gaps in mitigating blue-green algae outbreaks.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government invest in greater consultation with local government through the MDA to:

- a) **Maximise the benefits of environmental watering;**
- b) **Mitigate the risk of blackwater events;**
- c) **Enhance water literacy and subsequent evidence-based support for environmental watering among councils and local communities.**

2. The impact of management tools like carryover.

There appears to be an absence of available, reliable, consumable reference material to assist water holders in making informed decisions on maximising the benefits of carryover water under current provisions.

Our members have expressed concerns that environmental water being held in storages could occupy airspace otherwise used for irrigation water, has had the effect of triggering spills creating economic losses, and could create additional risks of unintended flooding at times of peak volume.

The MDA would suggest a public information campaign containing practical information around how environmental water is managed, and whether the carryover of environmental water reduces the availability of water for irrigators.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government

- a) **Ensure there are transparent and equitable rules around management tools like carryover;**
- b) **Work with the Murray Darling Association in the development of evidence-based resources to enhance water literacy among councils and local communities.**

3. Barriers to more efficient use of environmental water.

Carp management

The volume of carp – exceeding 80 per cent of the biomass in the river system is a known contributor to poor health in the river system, and an impediment to realising the full value of environmental water and the efficiency of its use.

The Fisheries and Research Development Corporation is currently partnering with the MDA in the consultation phase of the National Carp Control Plan, which may subsequently yield significant benefit to the efficient use of environmental water.

The FRDC has reported that carp numbers in the Murray-Darling Basin trebled between 2004 and 2014, acknowledging that environmental watering is essential to the overall health of the system. However, the FRDC also acknowledges that carp benefit from water on the floodplain – including from environmental watering, with overbank watering sometimes encouraging additional spawning.

Given that environmental watering has the potential to increase carp populations, the rollout of the carp control virus – if proven effective – could ameliorate a barrier to more efficient use of environmental water.

The MDA also acknowledges that the virus could only be rolled out if effective clean-up strategies are in place, along with carefully managed restocking and detailed knowledge of breeding habit/locations and the effect of pulsing of water flows.

Recommendation: That the Victorian State Government work with the Murray Darling Association and the FRDC to support a constructive and well-informed decision on the implementation of an effective carp control strategy.

Physical barriers

Barriers such as locks and weirs within the river system influence how environmental water can be delivered. Some of these structures are considered within the Package of Supply, Constraints and Efficiency Measures being considered under the Basin Plan's Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism. These projects could enable the more efficient use of environmental water.

The MDA supports investment in works and measures and recommends active consultation with local government to ensure these investments, like the water they are managing, deliver maximum benefit to the local communities.

Further, the Murray Darling Association will be facilitating an informed, high level dialogue on the role of the barrages in meeting Basin Plan outcomes in Renmark on October 12. This is an important discussion that is intended to enhance water literacy among councils and community members, and contribute constructive input into the development of sound public policy to optimise the benefits of physical barriers in achieving Basin Plan outcomes.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government

- a) Provides consumable fact sheets for use and reference by local government and communities on the Package of Supply, Constraints and Efficiency Measures;**
- b) Engage with Victorian councils through the MDA to maximise the social and economic, as well as the environmental benefits of Victorian projects under the Package of Supply, Constraints and Efficiency Measures**

4. Existing fees and charges for environmental water.

The MDA hears from its member councils support for environmental watering, but also hears concerns about what is perceived to be a lesser contribution in fees and charges for environmental water holders than for irrigators and other users.

Under Goulburn-Murray Water's 2017/18 pricing structure, entitlement storage fees for water users (irrigators) as compared to non-water users (environmental water) may provide a financial benefit for the non-water user in some circumstances.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government review arrangements for existing fees and charges for water holders to ensure that fees and charges for all users, including environmental water users are balanced, fair and equitable and supports equitable charges for water and non-water users.

SUMMARY

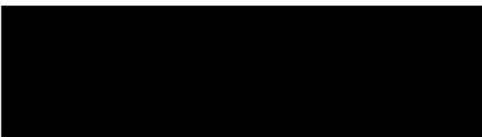
In summary, the MDA believes the key policy solution to the issues outlined in this Inquiry rests in all levels of government working together.

Some of the issues are real – these can be addressed by consulting at the ground level and making the most of local knowledge. Genuine answers rest in this knowledge, and the ability to effectively apply it.

Other issues may be perceived – these can be addressed by public information campaigns that clearly articulate how, when, where and why environmental water is being used, and the benefits of it.

Final recommendation: That the Victorian Government work with the Murray Darling Association to invest in our communities' future by increasing the level of water literacy at local government and community level through targeted education initiatives and enhanced communication systems.

Yours sincerely,



Emma Bradbury
Chief Executive Officer
Murray Darling Association