

## **Inquiry into Auditor General Report No.202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)**

Mr Stuart Simms

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**Organisation Name:** Kerang Lakes Land and Water Action Group  
**Your position or role:** President

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### **YOUR SUBMISSION**

**Submission:**

November 2019

Submission to Inquiry into Auditor-General's report No 202 "Meeting obligations to protect Ramsar Wetlands 2016"

Dear Sir/Madam

I make this Submission on behalf of "The Kerang Lakes Land and Water Action Group", a small voluntary group of Community minded Residents in the Kerang Lakes Area, of Northern Victoria, who commit their time working towards the betterment of the Environment around them.

Some of the members have 60 years of involvement in various Water and Irrigation Boards, Natural Resource Management Committees, Catchment Management Authorities and Salinity Management Plans, and so have gained a wealth of knowledge.

The Kerang Lakes consist of a series of Natural Lakes of up to 1000 Ha in area, in the Northern Flood Plains of the Loddon and Avoca rivers and are Ramsar listed almost in their entirety. While some of the Lakes remain "intermittent" i.e. they still remain in a natural wetting and drying regime depending on seasonal conditions, many have been permanent wetlands now for 94 years as part of the Torrumbarry Irrigation System.

While most of the lakes have remained in a satisfactory condition, but for the advent of European Carp in 1975 which proved to be the greatest Environmental Vandal of all time, 4 of our lakes, namely Lakes Tutchewop, Kelly, Little and William, were purposely converted to Salinity Evaporative Basins as part of the Barr Creek Drainage Diversion Scheme of 1969.

This, obviously, has seen them move away from their original Ramsar listing in the Kerang lakes system of 1982, and even further from their natural state pre BCDDS and so are worthy of discussion. With the current Murray Darling Basin Plan and the Unbundling of irrigation water, flows in the Barr Ck are such now as to question the need for the BCDDS at all.

I responded, in length, to the North Central Catchment Management Authority's "Kerang Wetlands Ramsar

Action Plan 2016 – 2024” in March 2017 but gained no feedback. However the section of my comments pertaining to these 4 lakes are still quite relevant so will reproduce them here as the main part of my Submission.

“P- 98 – 102 – Lake Tutchewop – and it is here now that my views will diverge markedly from your current Advisers

Lake Tutchewop should never have been listed as “permanent saline/brackish/alkaline Lakes” but rather “fresh / occasionally brackish”

It was, historically, a part of the Kerang lakes system, actually the first meeting place of the waters of the Loddon/ Kerang Lakes and the Avoca system in times of floods, and so generally fresh and was the “Aquatic Center” for the Swan Hill residents.

It was, on occasions, brackish, as flood waters from Kangaroo Lake in major floods, would have incorporated Lake Kelly on its path to Tutchewop and so a salt load, hence, no trees around the Lake. However, we have evidence of bumper oat crops being grown on the bed of Lake Tutchewop – over a decade or so of being dry, the salt would leach out. It was also included in permanent water for the Kerang Lakes from the Torrumbarry system in 1925, but taken out in the 1930’s because of “excessive losses” – of the 1.3 million tonnes of salt injected into the Lake from Barr Ck over the last 48 years, when dry 2 years ago, less than 100,000 tonnes remained on the surface – it leaks!!

In its natural state, Lake Tutchewop, along with Cullen’s Lake, was a very popular and valuable refuge for a huge range of migratory and local wildlife. While it still, occasionally, attracts large numbers, the variety has diminished to those preferring a saline environment. I would suggest it has been allowed to wander, markedly from its original obligation to Ramsar.

P – 103 to 115 – and I will incorporate all 3 lakes, Lakes William, Kelly and Little in the same comments.

Again, these Lakes have been wrongly Ramsar listed as “permanent saline/brackish/alkaline lakes” and should have been just “permanent saline”

They have been hypo-saline for perhaps thousands of years, having been noted by Major Mitchel in 1836 as “Lakes of Salt” and were harvested for salt as early as 1870 with the product being sent away in Paddle Steamers from Benjeroop, and up to 10,000 tons of salt was harvested annually during the 2nd World War as a part of the War effort.

The Ramsar listing of 1982 was done 13 years after the beginning of the addition of up to 2.5 Metres of Barr Ck water at a salinity of perhaps 3.000 to 7.000 EC – fresh water in terms of a hypo-saline lake – and so the listing included the words “brackish/alkaline lakes” – a measure of their condition at that moment, not their historic status or role – and so the repercussions of this unnatural practice has been far reaching to the welfare of our surrounding environment ever since.

In their natural state, these lakes were depressions in the landscape that acted as “pressure relief valves” for the surrounding, and perhaps more distant, saline ground water. The addition of 2.5 M of water has not only reversed the hydrology, with water now moving out not in, but being “fresh” it has dissolved much of the existing salt crust and taken it with it.

If we look at the AHD of the bed of these lakes now, I believe we will find it is some 150 mm lower than at the beginning of the operation – in effect, there is less salt in these lake now than there was 48 years ago. Considering these lakes be allowed to go back to their original status, it would be some time before commercial salt harvesting could resume as it was before the BCDDS as the salt crust on the lake bed has been destroyed and will take some time to re-establish such that it will carry heavy machinery again.

It is also ironic that the salinity of Lake Charm, remaining at 400 EC or less for 70 years of irrigation around that lake prior to the BCDDS, took a sudden and increasing rise during the super-charging of these lakes, and a corresponding fall in salinity with the drought and low water levels of Kelly, William and Little after the turn of the century. And, too, I believe we will find that the drop in salinity of this lake is far out of proportion to the operation of the Lake Charm Diversion Pumps.

The only way to maintain these lake as “brackish/alkaline lakes” is to super-charge them to the point of neutralising or reversing the hydrology and this, in my opinion, is counterproductive to the role of these lake and the betterment of the areas environment.

These lakes must be taken out of the BCDDS, or the input severely reduced, re-listed as “Hypo saline”, allowed to dry out and resume their role as groundwater pressure relief valves for the surrounding area.”

The history and management of the Kerang Lakes system is horrendously complex, such that it cannot be fully explained in this Submission and so I would welcome either further correspondence or a personal meeting with you so that I can explain in more detail those matters more relevant to your Inquiry.

Yours faithfully,

Stuart Simms Pres Kerang Lakes Land and Water Action Group

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**Signature:**  
Stuart F Simms