

# SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

## Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Implementation Review 2023

I appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's (the "Commission") inquiry into the effectiveness of the implementation of the Basin Plan 2012 (Basin Plan) and water resource plans.

My interest in the Basin Plan relates to achieving sustainable rivers for all stakeholders in the community.

Further, I have had a long-term role in horticultural crops and the importance of the responsible marketing of horticultural products, including promoting and protecting Australia's 'clean & green' reputation.

Incidences of Blue Green Algae and widespread media coverage of fish kill incidences have a negative impact on our markets and our reputation. Respect and use of science is imperative in addressing this risk to horticultural industries and to the environment.

The issues associated with the Basin Plan are detailed and complex. I will restrict my response to three key matters as follows:

### **1. Environmental Water Management.**

Independent, skilled audits of management of environmental water should be a priority. These audits should be utilized for evaluation for corrective action.

Two example requirements to consider when planning audits:

- sufficient environmental water is available to ensure a sustainable water management system, and
- that watering events are effectively applied to achieve planned outcomes.

In February 2011, Australian National Audit Office undertook an audit of *Restoring the Balance*. The audit addressed the early stages of *Restoring the Balance*.

We are now in the 13<sup>th</sup> year since *Restoring the Balance* and hence a further relevant Audit is long overdue ie. It has been far too long since the last Audit in 2011.

### **2. Governance and Institutional Arrangements.**

In 2022, Troy Grant (the Water Compliance Inspector-General) was reported<sup>1</sup> as saying:

- The NSW Government's failure to submit Water Management Plans means half of the Murray-Darling Basin's water can't be properly monitored;
- The most critical failure of the Basin Plan was the absence of all 20 of the NSW Government's Water Resource Plans (WRPs); and
- The single most important compliance matter in the Basin Plan is sustainable diversion limits compliance.

The Commission's Inquiry Report 2018 made substantial governance and institutional reform recommendations. I would support the Commission's review of the extent of adoption of these reforms and consequences of not doing so.

Further, the NSW Government has been negligent in its responsibility for lodgement of WRPs that are in accordance with the Basin Plan. The Commission should review the NSW Government's WRP development and approval processes.

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<sup>1</sup> Sunraysia Daily newspaper, 3 June 2022

Similarly, the Murray Darling Basin Authority's processes relating to their WRP compliance responsibility should also be reviewed.

Note that in my submission to the 2018 Productivity Commission review, I made the following comments on this topic (which are still relevant today):

- I believe that Basin Plan performance is satisfactory in Southern Basin, where efficient metering, water trading and the 'cap' on further diversion are processes generally accepted.
- In contrast is the Northern Basin, where sustainability of the Darling River and tributaries has been threatened by mismanagement.
- It would be appreciated if the Commission would investigate and report on any authority given to the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) to require any State to take remedial action in the event of unsatisfactory performance of Basin Plan matters by that State.

### **3. Climate Change.**

A shortcoming of the Commission's *2023 Terms of Reference* is the failure to recognise that climate change appears to be changing rapidly over the past 10 or so years. There are no means to assess the status and trend in climate change in the in the 5 years from 2018 to 2023 or for the next 5 years.

Given that the MDB Plan has been functioning for 11 years, I believe the MDBA should be much further advanced in determining the effect on Basin water resources and communicating these findings to Basin stakeholders.

From a risk management perspective, it seems extraordinary that such a major risk is not being addressed sufficiently, embedded in future planning and communicated to stakeholders.

Barrie MacMillan

31 July 2023

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#### **About the Author**

My former employment roles centred on processing irrigated food products, with Mildura Co-operative Fruit Co. Ltd for 31 years and with dried fruit marketing as a Board member of Australian Dried Fruit Sales P/L (later known as Sunbeam Foods) for 26 years. Dried fruit was marketed in bulk and consumer packs on both domestic and export markets. Since retirement, I have served as a Board member on statutory regional state catchment management authorities and rural and urban water authorities.