



MACQUARIE MARSHES ENVIRONMENTAL LANDHOLDERS ASSOCIATION

Introduction:

The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA) was formed in 1995 when there was increasing pressure to further reduce water flows to the Macquarie Marshes. Its members are local landholders, many of whom are third and fourth generation landholders in the area, and all are dedicated to ensuring a healthy and productive marsh for future generations.

The aim of MMELA is:

The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA) aims to ensure the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the internationally recognised Macquarie Marshes.

The Macquarie Marshes is a large semi-permanent, **flow through** wetland on the lower end of the Macquarie River in central western NSW. It covers an area of approximately 200,000ha of which 12% is a Nature Reserve managed by the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS). The remaining 88% is privately owned freehold land which supports an extensive agricultural industry. Much of the land has been held in families for generations and the property owners have an extraordinary knowledge and understanding of all aspects of the Marshes and its management.

The Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve, “Wilgara” Wetland and U Block are listed on the Ramsar Convention of Wetlands of International Importance. The Nature Reserve is also listed on the Japan - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (JAMBA) and the China - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (CAMBA) along with several other agreements. It is the responsibility of the whole community, including State and Federal Governments, to ensure management of the wetland does not compromise values and/or obligations set out in the above mentioned agreements.

The Macquarie Marshes is unique both environmentally and economically. Research indicates it is the most important colonial nesting waterbird breeding site in Australia for species diversity and nesting density (*Kingsford and Thomas 1995*). The majority of the breeding colonies are situated on privately owned land where landholders have managed and protected them since settlement. The Marshes also support an extensive cattle grazing industry which is its main economic focus. Sustainable grazing is encouraged by MMELA and the majority of landholders are acutely aware of the environmental needs of the wetland and undertake congruent management practices.

Government policy and decision making relating to natural resource management has in the past had devastating impacts on the Marshes, particularly water management, which has severely reduced water flows through river regulation and other such legislation.

When Burrendong Dam was completed, and irrigation was established throughout the Macquarie Valley scientific research showed flows to the internationally recognised Macquarie Marshes were greatly decreased. MMELA brought this to the attention of many governments and fought for water to be recovered for this diverse and unique wetland and its associated floodplain. As a result both the NSW and Federal Governments introduced 'buy back' programs and improved efficiency schemes (450 million in Macquarie) in an effort to halt the ongoing destruction of the Macquarie Marshes. It must be remembered that these programs only returned a small portion of the water originally taken from the Macquarie Marshes and the landholders who depend on its health and vitality to make their living.

Effectiveness of the implementation of the basin plan

- Firstly the management of environmental water (EWA, river bank and CHEW) is working well in the Macquarie with the limited water that is available.
- The environmental watering advisory group (known locally as EFRG) that was established under the 2004 water sharing plan has worked very well and while there has been changes to the membership and the responsibility of the chairs role, we believe the group is working well. With the new membership came some new challenges, firstly the Commonwealth objective to provide connectivity with the Barwon/Darling, a renewed focus on environmental assets such as fish and an expectation to coordinate flows with other systems. The EWA group with the support of the of NSW DPE has adapted well to the challenge and continue to agree on decisions while not ever satisfied that there is enough water.
- Our community support the ongoing purchase of water for the environment and see firsthand the positive outcomes achieved by the environmental water managers.
- Irrigators are a part of the river community it must be noted they are not the voice for the whole community, many stakeholders along the Macquarie are under represented in decision making on water policy and solutions.

Why is there not enough water in the environment's accounts?

It must be noted that not long before the development of the basin plan, water trade became available to irrigators in the Macquarie valley. The combination of Commonwealth purchasing general security licences that may /may not have been used and smaller irrigators being offered an attractive price for their water on the temporary market has seen the reliability of general security water in the Macquarie dramatically fall. This has seen an increase of water usage as many small licence holders that traditionally only used some (undeveloped licences) of their entitlement now could sell or trade their water. This fall in reliability has seen the benefits from environmental water reaching the Marshes reduced. Also, while this was going on there has also been other changes to river management that has also reduced the effectiveness of environmental flows.

- Water NSW becoming more efficient has seen a dramatic reduction in surplus flows reaching the Marshes.
- A reduction in base flows as the river operator is tasked to improve efficiencies.

- Buy backs triggered activation of under utilised or sleeper licences this in turn has reduced reliability of all general security licences, this has reduced the effectiveness of the water held by the environment.
- The Macquarie is a winter /spring fed catchment in the northern basin, flows into the Barwon Darling traditionally arrived during a low flow period in the Barwon as the other tributaries are summer fed catchments. The water that the Macquarie provides to the Barwon is filtered through the Marshes this helps the Water quality that has suffered in recent years. Reports of reduced filtration costs for the Bourke town water supply is just one of the important roles the Macquarie water plays in the Barwon/Darling system.

Sustainable diversion Limits / Over recovery

The sustainable diversion limits were never adequately assessed in relation to environmental sustainability and were largely set to reflect current baseline use by the irrigation industry at the time. At no stage did the claims of over recovery acknowledge that there were many positive economic outcomes as a result of water recovered for the environment.

The Macquarie River is (so called) over recovered but the ecological condition and data for the Macquarie Marshes wetlands site indicates otherwise.

We hold great concerns about what damage could/will be done to the ecological character of the wetland if any water was to be sold/handed back to the irrigation community.

- Removal of any water would see a continued decline in the Marshes ability to withstand shocks. One such shock is the occurrence of empty dams that has been exacerbated by water trade and the lowering of reliability. During the period of the MDBA manipulating the outcome of the northern basin review, MMELA worked hard to convince authority's that damage will be done to the health of the wetland.
- As a result of the basin plan the conflict in our local community is as hostile as it's ever been. While the objectives of the plan were Economic, Social and Environmental, in the Macquarie it's been a failure at a social level (increased conflict between water dependant community's) and environmental, as water trade has lowered reliability.

Like the NSW government the MDBA has given into the continued lobbying from the irrigation industry who have been relentless. The irrigation industry employs professional lobbyist to target policy developers to favour the irrigation industry. In extreme cases they have been so successful that the MDBA have gone on to employ these staff.

On the other side are a mixed bag of green groups and some landholder groups (MMELA and the Australian floodplain association) that are mostly small business operators who often live in isolated communities with little or no access to help to lobby policy makers. The people who live and run business around the Macquarie Marshes have watched as the flow regimes have altered due to river regulation and now with the change of water use and the lowering of the reliability have tried their best to adapt.

Credit v/s Debit accounting.

The NSW government still use an outdated allocation method to set the available water determination in the Macquarie. This includes allocating water that is in fact projected inflows to the dams, based on the drought of record 1937/1941. This fails to include the most recent droughts that are much worse. With the increased variability that's predicted in river flows in the catchment it is critical that the resource assessment review this outdated budgeting method and implement a plan that provides some surety to the river dependent eco system and the communities that depend on it.

The Macquarie Marshes will be the first to notice the impact of the predicted variability that is expected as a result of climate change, The impact to the connectivity to the Barwon Darling has already been affected and now the Marshes are likely to experience ongoing change.

Flood plain harvesting

While some reference was made to the water extracted from the floodplain in the 2004 Water sharing plan in the Macquarie there was no mention of volumes. When the NSW government was required to start the process of licencing the extraction some major mistakes were made. The volumes of extraction were not included in the Sustainable diversion limits and now with the issuing of licences we are not only faced with the issue of over allocation of the regulated reach but the potential impact to the floodplains function as large overbank flows are restricted.

Recommendations for improvements to the basin plan.

- The term over recovered must no longer be used in relation to environmental flows in the Macquarie.
- All downstream communities be included in an assessment including the production values of a healthy functioning river system, the value to the wider community by achieving a healthy functioning wetland as well as connectivity to the Barwon. This needs to include a detailed independent assessment of beef cattle grazing in the Macquarie Marshes and its value to both the community and the environment.
- An immediate change in direction to focus on preparedness for **climate change** and the impact that increased climate variability will have on both the Macquarie Marshes and the connectivity to the Barwon/Darling.
- The MDBA must address the wider community concerns about CLIMATE CHANGE as the Ramsar listing of wetlands like the Macquarie Marshes will be the first to suffer.
- That the MDBA acknowledge the many people and communities that are not represented by the irrigation community, they must be given a forum to be included.

Regards Garry Hall
President MMELA