

24 March 2021

To the National Water Initiative Committee,

RE: SUBMISSION | NATIONAL WATER REFORM

My name is Hayley Talbot and I live on the Lower Clarence River. Apart from a few years in Sydney and the Gold Coast working, I have always lived in the Clarence Valley, and am proud to be raising my family here, providing my children the wonderful childhood I enjoyed.

We live on the banks of "The Mighty Clarence" as it is adoringly referred to by the many fine folk who enjoy life and raise their children along its banks. It is a thriving agricultural food bowl, and a land of many stories and connections.

As a busy working mother of two children, I found the Draft National Water Reform Report tough reading, but nevertheless felt compelled to furnish my concerns.

This week World Water Day 2021 was celebrated, and the theme this year was "Valuing Water". According to the United Nations "The value of water is about much more than its price."

After reading the draft report on National Water Reform, it occurred to me that our mindset locally is not on the same page.

Firstly, I do not accept that water can be a \$26 billion industry (in the southern Murray Darling Basin alone). Businesses should not have entitlements they can trade, and use as collateral for loans. If you have a water entitlement and can trade with it, then by definition you have more than what you need of something that isn't yours. I would like to have a water entitlement, but I have to pay for my water, and I don't get to trade with it or use it to secure loans.

Secondly, the report outlines that governments have provided "water for the environment" through water plans and have also "acquired entitlements" that are "managed for environmental benefit".

I reject the provision (or the buying back!) of "water entitlements" for the environment. Water IS the environment.

Even if I did accept this, the total volume of environmental water entitlements in the Murray Darling for 2018-19 was a mere 23% of all entitlements on issue.

So much for the value of water being so much more than its price.

I am concerned that the report frames such issues as accepted and foundational, without at all examining their fairness or validity, especially in the context of a rapidly changing climate, responsible stewardship for future generations, and cultural awareness.

In fact, the report specifically references the increasing importance of water trading and markets, and building on the 30 years trading experience in the MDB in providing stronger foundations for *developing markets elsewhere in Australia*. I find this deeply concerning.

This is not addressing the integrity issues of some of the woeful water management we have seen in the MDB, or instilling confidence in the public that the new Water Reform Initiative will redress the water injustices that have occurred and are perpetuated.

Words such as “compliance” and “regulation” are meaningless unless infringements are truthfully monitored and sanctions enforced. And they are further meaningless if the behaviour of big business doesn’t even invoke such words, because their conduct fits neatly inside the definition of “entitlement”.

Even as I provide this submission, I am not assured that my voice will form anything other than “community consultation”. Which no one is actually bound to listen to, or functionally heed.

The report is certainly clear about the challenges of water storage, distribution and management on a vast, dry continent such as Australia, and given I live on the banks of the largest river on the eastern seaboard of this continent (currently un-dammed), I am terrified for our future.

Sincerely,

Hayley A. Talbot