

**From**

Don & Yvonne Stewart

**To The South Australian Government Royal Commission****Re: The Murray Darling Basin Plan**

**We from outback NSW need your help.**

**Concerning the Mismanagement of the Darling River and Menindee Lakes**

Dear Sir/Madam

We thank you for addressing this letter.

First and foremost, we and hundreds of other people we have spoken to in Broken Hill, Menindee, Wilcannia, and many places along the Murray Darling basin are TOTALLY 100% in SUPPORT of A FEDERAL ROYAL COMMISSION INTO THE WHOLE MURRAY DARLING BASIN MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BASIN PLAN. There are so many tentacle's coming out of the Murray Darling basin plan it gives people room to exploit the system so WE MUST HAVE A FEDERAL ROYAL COMMISSION. Please assist us in this matter, to set a sustainable path for the future. If something is not done to save our water system, we expect to see the death of the Menindee Lakes and the Darling River.

Some of the proposed changes by the MDBA appear as good engineering outcomes however the devil is in the detail:

eg. So far the Darling River has received a less reliable water supply from its catchment sources than ever before due to good private or public engineering up stream.

Plans for Menindee Lakes will allow even more rapid release of water downstream, and less water held for release to the lower Darling.

**Effect of Mismanagement**

We were born in and have lived in Broken Hill all our lives (as did our parents) and are now in our 60s. Being in the middle of the outback and having such a low rainfall has always been a challenge for keeping our town and gardens green. All gardens need constant watering so residents and Council have a juggling act between enough watering and the cost of our water bills. Most of us only plant water wise plants. The other problem is dealing with water that causes build up of salts in our air coolers (mostly evaporative) and hot water systems and is also detrimental to our gardens.

We also have to continually keep in mind the lead in our environment from our mines that run through the centre of our town. This is best kept in check with paving, lawns/gardens and washing down.

The Darling River and Menindee Lake Scheme is our only water recreational area and has been the haven for generations of families to experience boating, fishing, camping, skiing and learning about nature of the river and wetlands. A lot has been invested by locals in such places as Copi Hollow and Sunset Strip. Also, the pipeline has served us well even when Broken Hill had twice the population.

A healthy river and lakes are also important for all the people living along the length of the river and for tourism in the area.

We are all so disheartened and depressed at the state of our river and lakes. Many of us have been fighting now for 10 to 15 years for our voices to be heard by governments regarding the degradation of this life blood. Money and profits should not come before the environment and health of people dependant on this area. Water should be for everyone and the amount used by graziers and people in this area is negligible compared to the amount used by the cotton growers.

### **The Cause and Result**

We have known for years that the situation we are in now is not just due to climate change or drought or for that matter, the fictitious “evaporation rates” spruiked for this area. Our lakes are also criticised for being too shallow. They are three times deeper than South Australia’s Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert. These evaporate more per year than the total capacity of the Menindee Lakes Scheme.

We all know that over extraction and corruption by cotton growers above Burke and government officials has been the main problem (and well before the 4 Corners episode). To let hundreds of kilometres of river dry up and drain the lakes once again is an outrage and an ecological disaster.

This mismanagement has happened three times in the last 15 years without thought for the environment or all of us living in this area. Each time this happens sees more gardens, residential lawns, council gardens, parks and playing fields die in Broken Hill. These are almost impossible to replace due to costs and water.

Menindee, Wilcannia and other small townships and property owners along the Darling and around the lakes are devastated and ruined. All that is left of the river are cesspools of blue green algae which are poisoning wildlife and stock. We know the cause of this is low flows, flood plain harvesting, water theft and mismanagement from all departments involved.

The people from Wilcannia do not even have their weir in the correct place – what other township along a river has their weir above the town?? The river is their life.

Menindee has lost their permanent plantings of table and wine grapes, apples and other stone fruit along with a variety of vegetables. Farmers in Menindee and the Lower Darling have lost their income and way of life. Not to mention millions of dollars in tourism in Broken Hill and the river/lakes area. This area should be an oasis in the desert as it once was. What campers want to visit an area where they cannot swim or catch and eat fish from a dried up river and dry lake beds?

In this harsh environment good water is essential for our wildlife, towns, cities and industries. The Darling River, Menindee Lakes and Great Darling Anabranch (now reduced to a pipeline) and catchment areas are our lifeblood.

### **Water take measurement and metering**

Inappropriate crops like cotton and rice require flood irrigation and when water theft is added to their over generous allocations nothing is left. Then when a flow does come, polluted water that has been stored is let go down the river and croppers catch the fresh water. This results in a polluted river which once was a pristine waterway.

Floodplain harvesting is also thieving water that should be flowing down the river. Thousands of illegal dams on the small tributaries are catching water that should be flowing into the river. This water is not regulated or paid for and is a huge loss to the river.

The majority of the large rivers and other tributaries that feed the Darling are above Burke. Many of these larger rivers are also over extracted. Increased storages, dams and weirs have virtually eliminated small to medium floods on most of the rivers in the Murray Darling Basin. Plants, fish, birds, animals and graziers are suffering from this. Many of the old River Red Gums are dying (some hundreds of years old). The problem is quite evident – far too much water is being extracted from all the tributaries.

Bird breeding grounds are being lost and our large number of aquatic species are either dying from lack of water or being poisoned by the water that is left. Each time there is a flow and then the water is let go too quickly, big river gums crash into the river and banks subside.

Small irrigators down stream have had to watch their permanent crops die. We cannot eat cotton. Small and medium flows MUST be returned to the river.

All this should not be happening. If upstream irrigator's allocations were reasonable and sustainable, and water theft did not occur, there would be enough water to maintain a healthy river and lakes system. Far too much water has been allocated for the amount available and greedy irrigators want more and more even when there is none.

All water taken should be metered and only allocations allowed. Operations of big water users should not be allowed to affect other graziers due to their greed. This environmental devastation is happening on other river systems - Check out YouTube article titled "Brenda – in the shadow of Cubbie Station".

### **Transparency measures**

As far as we can see, there has been no transparency measures applied, otherwise all this illegal water theft would not be happening. Regulators would have been doing their jobs checking on the culprits, preventing and fining perpetrators.

Had there been any transparency, a business case for the construction of the pipeline from Wentworth to Broken Hill should have been released. Wentworth council/residences would then have been aware of it before construction started.

### **Better management of environmental water**

During the last 15 years, upstream businesses, irrigation lobbies and Government agencies have been working toward decommissioning the Menindee Lakes and using all available water upstream. They seem to think it is wasted if not used for profit.

1. 300% hold overs must go
2. Meters must work and go back to base
3. Retrospective legalisation of illegal dams must be repealed
4. Remove illegal dams to restore necessary small to medium flows

5. 2012 Barwon Darling water sharing plan be reviewed – committee to review
6. Cultural flows for the Darling like northern NSW rivers have (as per Federal High Court ruling)
7. Illegal dams – farmers are double dipping – 7000Gl potential per year in run offs from tributaries to the Darling. Calculated up to 3500Gl stolen. Flood plain harvesting vitally important that all water is metered. Calculated via satellite imagery etc
8. Differentiate between the Murray & Darling as far as geographically and climatically and culturally and cannot be managed by the same standards
9. The re-engineering of the Menindee Lakes be done to stop the lakes being used as a scapegoat for evaporation losses and that they take into account the needs socially, environmentally, economically and culturally.
10. Alterations to the Menindee Lakes should include construction of a low level weir between Menindee Lake and Cawndilla Lake, a channel at the rear of Cawndilla Lake enabling water to flow into the Darling River and a weir/lock between Pamamaroo Lake and Copi Hollow Lake. Copi would then be able to continue to be a recreational area as well as a haven for wild life and fish in times of low water.
11. Meter tampering to result in loss of licence and any water theft to result in loss of licence
12. Government to stop paying inflated prices to big water users for water buy back e.g. Tandou

The introduction of digital tamper proof flow meters on all pumps should be a priority and implemented immediately. More compliance officers with greater powers to suspend pumping if rules are breached, larger fines for over extraction and harsher fines for second and third offences leading to surrender of water licence. Action must be swift, not in 1, 2 or 3 years time.

Healthy rivers and lakes are far more important to our country than profits, and water should be for everyone and the environment. We will not give up our fight.

If we had a healthy river and lakes scheme there would be no need for the pipeline currently being built from Wentworth to Broken Hill. The waste of \$500 million dollars of tax payer's money to steal water from the Murray River and pump up hill to Broken Hill is insane and shows the incompetence of governments involved. To date there has been no business case for the project or future costing of water given to anyone despite constant demands.

Thanking you and kind regards

Don & Yvonne Stewart