

Adjournment grievance – 15 Nov 07

MURRAY RIVER DROUGHT MANAGEMENT

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (16:14): I wish to read into *Hansard* a letter from a constituent who is a dairy farmer. Members will note that I have not edited the letter. The letter is in relation to the severe drought the family is living through and the demise of their dairy farming operations. The letter states:

Adrian, this is a copy of a letter I have sent out to others in the community. I just thought you need to know what is happening here on the Narrung Peninsula, since your visit to us back in July of this year. I am not after sympathy, because we are survivors, but there are others out there who are not coping that well with their lot. There are many, many stories of hardship out there that politicians need to be aware of. It is strange that the most important element people need is water, yet with all the political campaigning at the moment, no-one has tackled the main issue that the river could possibly run dry and our nation will have a natural disaster at hand. If there is no substantial rain in the Murray-Darling catchment in the next couple of months, Dartmouth and Hume Dams will be close to dry and then what?

Well, the time is approaching. We are on our last week of dairying. The cows have been sold and they will be trucked out over the next couple of weeks. Our once mighty River Murray which flows into the Lower Lakes, Alexandrina and Albert at the end of its journey, is in major trouble. Our Lake (Albert) is receding at a fast rate. We have dredged out as far as we can to get water but it will not be far enough in the near future. We are talking days not weeks. With our predicted hot days and southerly wind season approaching, we will see our water levels drop to what the experts predict, half a metre below sea level.

Who would have thought that the Narrung Peninsular which was heralded as one of the major dairying regions in South Australia would be brought to its knees like it has? Our family has been dairying here for nearly 50 years and irrigating for nearly 40 years. We have built our herd from 100 cows to 700. We were in the top 10 per cent in Australia for milk quality, averaging 8,000 litres milk per annum [per cow]—over 20 per cent higher than the national average. We received the Genetics Australia award for Dairy Business Enterprise of the Year in 2000, we have embraced the latest technology for dairying and irrigation, we have our own weather station, monitoring the vagaries of weather, salinity, wind, evaporation...all this using the worst quality water in the river system, water every else has used and no-one else wants.

What can I say, the Government has admitted mismanagement of the river, they have admitted overallocation of water...They say they are concerned, they have been warned, yet no-one listened. They still talk about a weir at the end of the Murray to hold back water if we don't get rain in the next few months. A weir will not solve the problem. The river needs to flow. If the river is not able to flush the salt and rubbish out of its system, it will die.

If you can imagine putting all the food and associated toxins in your mouth and letting it go right through your system only to be blocked off at the end...what do you think would happen? It's not a good ending, it would be a cancer that will not stop, it will build back up your system slowly poisoning all the vital organs in its path. It will be a slow dreadful death. We have many locks along the river now, we don't need another one.

The real problem is overallocation or overutilisation of the river's resources. Back in the 1980s we were told to use our water licences or lose them, so many who did not use their water allocation used it for expansion of their irrigation or sold it to be used elsewhere. In our own situation we only used 80 per cent of our allocation, the other 20 per cent remained unused and we considered it our contribution back to the environment. We could have sold it for someone else to use, but elected not to do so.

It concerns me also that the water issue has affected so many farmers and their communities along the river with such devastating consequences, yet the bureaucrats of all persuasions don't have any idea what to do. Are they playing politics or are they just going to sit back and let this catastrophe happen. At the end of the day, ordinary Australians will be the losers not just the producers, but the consumers. Farming in Australia could possibly be a thing of the past and we will be reliant on food import. These products will not have the same stringent quality assurance that is demanded and expected from Australian farmers.

It is already too late for many of us along the river system. If these low river flow conditions continue, I cannot see that we will be irrigating again here for many years without a flood of biblical proportions, and we will see the end of dairying on our peninsular, possibly forever. Farmers on the Narrung Peninsular do not have access to any other water, be it mains or underground, so, if dairying and irrigation were to cease, there will be millions of dollars of stranded assets just sitting in the paddocks going to waste. Such a huge shame, not to mention families who have had to make huge agonising decisions on their future, to stay or go; sons, daughters moving on because the businesses cannot afford to keep their dreams alive. Each farmer has made their own decision to either

close down, relocate or try and hang in there hoping the water situation will improve.

This problem has been exacerbated by the drought, but the river was in trouble before the drought took effect. As irrigators with a water allocation, we have been told that we can lease our water out and still receive a reasonable income from the lease, but what thought has been put into that statement? Where will the water go? It will be water that will not come down here. Catch twenty two.

There needs to be questions asked as to where the water traded is going—both now and in the past. How can we expect the water to flow properly if we have traded the water away upstream. A stock take of all water usage needs to be done. The water that is being purchased by the Government needs to be put in a Bank, where all and sundry can see that that water is never used or sold again. In other words all water saved has to be accounted for. Cut back the entire river allocation usage.

As I said it may be too late for many of us at the end of the river, yet we are still prepared to fight for the life of the River. We have a huge fight in front of us, for the life of the river. It cannot be one region against another or one state against another, or rural against city. We have a moral responsibility to all fight for the life of the River. Yet the future will see wars fought over water.

That is the end of the letter from the constituent, and I commend them for sending it. It just goes to show some of the heartache that is being felt in the Lower Murray and lake system.