

MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN – March 8, 2011

Adjourned debate on motion of Hon. P. Caica (resumed on motion).

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:50): I rise to talk about the Murray-Darling Basin plan. When we finally get to an outcome of what we are looking at, it will be interesting to see what the final outcome is from Canberra, where we have the new man in charge who is not confident of his own board, and wondering where it will go. It dismays me that, four years down the track, after the John Howard federal government put \$10 billion on the table to have a red hot crack at fixing the River Murray and the Murray-Darling Basin, we have seen very little money spent.

We have had \$5.9 billion earmarked for irrigation infrastructure upgrades. I have been up through the irrigation areas in the northern basin and southern basin, as I know the member for Chaffey and the member for MacKillop have as well, and it is more than interesting. It is almost outrageous what they seem to use in their systems in the northern basin and southern basin. There are hundreds of kilometres of open channels, such as the Mulwala channel, which I think is well over 160 kilometres long, and then there are all the feeder channels which come off it near Deniliquin. These systems are replicated right throughout the basin in states such as Victoria and New South Wales.

We have licenses in the Darling side of things—they call them Magic Pudding licences—where, if the water is there, you pump as hard as you can and get what you can, and that is what they are. It is like a Magic Pudding turns up, and that is what they call them. I have noted irrigators in Queensland doing media reports on the television. When asked, 'Have you ever taken water that you shouldn't have?' one bloke looked very coy and said, 'I may have borrowed some for a while.' The simple fact is a lot of this water is unmetered and all we have is a good guess, at times, as to what water is being used.

When I went up north, I found someone with a plane that would fly me up to St George, over all the properties. I know Cubbie Station is the one everyone knows, but Cubbie gets the flak and there are far more that literally harvest water. No pumps are involved. Cubbie corners two rivers—I think they are the Balonne Minor and the Culgoa—and essentially what they do is put a dam around the corner of the river and have a graded funnel heading into their storages, and they just grab as much water as they can.

I recall meeting with graziers in New South Wales, who only get about 40 per cent of the water they used to get on their properties in years gone by, before a lot of it was captured for irrigation. These graziers are managing to turn every megalitre of water into far more value than cotton. I am not going to bag cotton. Cotton is okay if you have the water. If you have the floodwaters, then cotton and rice are both fine, but if it is not there then they are products which should not be grown, and that is why they are opportunity crops.

When you get down to South Australia, where we are supposedly on high security water, there is a major flaw right across the system. For one year in the recent four-year drought, we only received 18 per cent allocation, and yet the Murrumbidgee was on 95 per cent for its high security water. Where is the equity in that? Also along these lines of unequal allocations, the Lower Darling was on 100 per cent allocation. There was not a lot of water, but I just cannot see the equity across the basin, where different levels of so-called high security water are at different levels. That is why there is general security water or low security water. That is the water for opportunity crops such as cotton and rice. So, that is what we have seen in the last four years, before, thankfully, bigger powers than any parliament in this country took over and refilled the river, and it is a fantastic sight to see. I was attempting to ski on the River Murray on Sunday, and it wasn't that successful I must say—

Mr Williams interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: Pushed a bit more water down towards the barrages, I think! No, it was much more relaxing on the inflatable three-seater lounge going behind the Mercruiser ski boat, I can assure you.

An honourable member: How big is that?

Mr PEDERICK: A 350 Mercruiser, plenty of punch thanks. It is an interesting sight to see with the black water going down the river, and the dirty water coming down from the Darling. You can see it when you cross the river from the Swanport Bridge or the old bridge going into Murray Bridge. You

can see plenty of traces of the dirty water, but I tell you that it is a lot better sight to see than what we have had for the last four years. There are still issues, let me say that, and I know that the minister is aware of the issue of acid sulphate soils and acid issues on the Lower Murray swamps. I know that there is a meeting coming up in Murray Bridge in regards to that but, hopefully, everything goes on track, and that water can be diluted with the flows as it flows out.

But there is so much work to do on those swamps. They were rehabilitated years ago. It was a mismatched affair. Some land was rehabilitated and some land was not. I believe that minister Hill was in charge at the time, and it would have been far better to have had those swamps all managed and rehabilitated together.

Some \$30 million of federal, state and farmer money was spent and, essentially, most of that money has been wasted. We have seen dairy farmers decimated, from about 120 dairy farmers down to about 20. Yes, I will admit that some of that would have been about market forces and the size of operations to remain viable, but it has certainly been some of the decisions in relation to rehabilitation of the swamps that has forced some of those people to go.

We have issues with levy banks falling away, and the government has been tardy in providing funding for repairing levy banks. We have got people with private levy banks that wanted to do work long ago. There were issues about whether they should do it or whether the government should do it. There are issues where the government likes to have the first 50 metres of freehold land by the river, but when it comes to the private levy banks there is no assistance.

Then we get further down the system through to Lake Albert and around Lake Alexandrina, and the carnage, the absolute carnage, that has happened there over the last four years. We had people, at times, spending \$5,000 a week to access water. I must admit that at the eleventh hour, with federal money that came out of some of the original money that John Howard's government put up, and with the state government administering the money, we got the pipeline through to the Currency Creek and Langhorne Creek winery regions. And, also, with some of that money, we got the pipework down around Meningie, and also along the Narrung Peninsula, and a little bit north of Meningie.

But we still have major problems. We still have issues where we have bunds in the river—bunds at Narrung that should have been long gone—but the minister only decided to write to the federal minister the other day in relation to the \$300,000 needed to remove the bund. And, because that bund has not gone, there are still massive salinity levels in Lake Albert, because it is a dead end lake, there is no outlet at the other end into the Coorong, and it is causing major issues still with salinity, and the ability to freshen that lake up to what was its natural state 95 per cent of the time.

We have seen horticulture disappear from the region around Lake Albert. We have seen farmers struggling, having to dredge out their trenches to get their water into their dairies. We have seen lucerne farmers struggle. All irrigators around the Lower Lakes are having a battle. Yet, with misinformation coming from further up the river that it is all right—that the lakes were always salty and you can just take the salt—well, that is simply not true. Ninety-five per cent of the time those lakes have been fresh.

If people want to talk about issues like pulling out the barrages at Goolwa and letting nature have its go, well, if we are going to go down that path, let's pull the 3,000 other structures out of the river, and all hell would break loose. Yes, it is an engineered system but it is engineered all the way through and it needs more engineering in the Eastern States. We do have the best irrigation systems in the system. We have put in the hard yards, we have worked under the cap, and people have still struggled with not being able to get their high security allocations at an appropriate level to get through.

High security is what South Australia needs because we have so many permanent plantings, and it should be on an equal footing across the basin with other high security water. It disgusts me that what should have happened instead of having these vast inequities between 18 and 19 per cent between our area and the Murrumbidgee, we could have had an equity across the system of perhaps at least 50 or 60 per cent of high security water and given people a fair go to keep going. But for a range of reasons South Australian irrigators were forced to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in the last four years leasing water in or buying water.

It is good to see that the River Murray corridor from the lakes through to the Victorian border is still receiving exceptional circumstances. There always was that year lag with irrigation, I believe, with exceptional circumstances. I fought hard and brought the matter to the attention of the government in

2006 for the dryland areas and then within the year or so the irrigators could tell. They already were in strife in 2006 because that was quite a significant drought.

But what we need to get out of any inquiry is some surety as to where the river is going to be. I asked Mike Taylor, when he was the chair of the authority when they had the meeting at Murray Bridge, how much water would be put back into the system if we put pipes and line channels in the northern basin interstate and in the southern basin interstate? He said we would probably be able to find about 2,000 gigalitres of water. To me, that instantly says there is two-thirds of the minimum requirement, as has been discussed with proponents of the guide to the plan, of 3,000 gigalitres going back to the river.

But what we see is irrigators and irrigating communities—and I can understand why they are upset but they seem not to want to change—upset that all this water will be taken from them without any efficiency gains. I think it certainly could be done. The money has been laid on the table and it should have been done. South Australia has done 99 per cent of what it could do, I believe—probably better than that. There is barely an open channel to be seen in South Australia. What are minute return channels or inlet channels on the swamps or around the lakes compared to the systems further away?

What do we need if this inquiry does go ahead? We need it to have some teeth because people are sick of talkfests around the river. My heart says to me that they will go on forever, but we need some reality. We need to see where the guide to the plan and the initial plan is going to take us. We do need an environmental outcome for the river but we also need to have a sustainable outcome for the river because we need to sustain our irrigation communities, as the irrigation communities in the Eastern States need to be sustained. I think a lot of the water can be found in efficiency upgrades, and this is where South Australia barely has a drop to spare in any sort of upgrades of this kind, because the efficiencies have been taken.

We have got the issue of our irrigators only being on 67 per cent allocation until the end of June. I believe that is because the government negotiated away their right to get full allocation with carryover policy. Everyone knows in this place—I have spoken on it passionately many times—about the need for environmental water; but there is more water going out the barrages down at Goolwa than is coming over the border. There are about 81 gigalitres a day coming over the border and 85 gigalitres a day going out through the barrages at Goolwa. It is a fantastic thing to see.

Probably less than three days flow across the border would fix our irrigators up to 100 per cent allocation—our irrigators, all the way from the Victorian border down to the mouth. That is certainly what they deserve. In the longer term, we must make sure, especially at this end of the river, that we keep up the fight and that, if we do have a state inquiry into the Murray-Darling Basin plan, it has plenty of resources thrown at it so that we can get a decent outcome, so it is not just another talkfest, and so that we can have some meaningful recommendations that the government will take up to keep up our fight to have equity in the River Murray system.

It has been darn tough four years for irrigators, and they have got some tough times to come yet, but they are all pleased to see more water flowing past their doors. I just hope that, as I said before, we do get the right result for South Australia, that we can work with the other states so that they can find equity in the upgrade of their irrigation systems, so that they can make the water savings and still grow the same amount of food.

I have mentioned the Rorato family in here before, near Deniliquin, who put in drippers one year, and it cost them \$700,000—doubled their efficiency of water use. However, the year the family spent the money they could not use the irrigation system, but, the next year, when he was only on 9 per cent allocation, he could turn that into 10 per cent. That is the sort of efficiency that can be found.

I do not believe for one minute that food security will be the problem in this debate. It is about being efficient with the water use. You can produce more food with less. It is what farmers, even dryland farmers, have had to do for many years to become more efficient as well. I am sure that irrigators across the board can do it. We must do it in a collaborative way and work with the other states, because, as we all know, states have been bickering over the River Murray for over 100 years, and, as I said, I am worried that it will go on for some time yet. We also must not forget the terrible drought we have been in for the last four years.

In my closing remarks I will recount a story about when I met with the Snowy hydro scheme people. The member for MacKillop was there and the candidate for Chaffey (before he became the

member for Chaffey) was with us. I said to these people from the Snowy hydro, 'If the Lower Lakes—Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert—were only 30 kilometres from Sydney, would they be in the state they are in now?' which was a devastating state, with sand blowing, the threat of acid sulphate soils. One of those people from Snowy hydro just jumped to his feet and said, 'They'd be pristine.' So, it is about population.

Everyone knows that we are at the bottom of the river. I would like to think there is an approach across the parliament that we all want the right result for the river. We want more than just words. We want to see the recommendations taking in place and we want to see action, because the environment needs a drink, irrigators need a drink, the economy needs a drink. We must make sure that everyone gets equity in the debate. I conclude my remarks.