

Smartrivers

13 March 2003

The Secretary
Mr Andrew Snedden
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Snedden

RE: Senate Rural and Regional Affairs & Transport Reference Committee
Inquiry into Rural Water Resource Usage

This submission particularly addresses matters 2 and 3 of the Terms of Reference.

Smartrivers is a local stakeholder organization representing the interests of irrigators in the Lower Balonne region, centred on St George and Dirranbandi in south-central Queensland. The Lower Balonne is the downstream section of the Condamine Balonne River and eventually enters the Barwon-Darling as the Culgoa and Bokhara rivers near Brewarrina in NSW. Another distributary channel, the Narran River, terminates in Lake Narran and the Ramsar listed Narran Lakes Nature Reserve.

Our interest has always been in seeing an open, honest and soundly based water resource planning process but sadly that has definitely not been what the Queensland State Government has provided to date in this catchment. For your benefit, we thought a quick summary of the Queensland approach would be useful. The Qld Department of Natural Resources and Mines (NRM) administers water resource planning under the Water Act 2000. NRM establishes a hydrological model of the rivers (IQQM) which simulates flow, extraction, evaporation, usage etc. They then coordinate a Technical Advisory Panel of experts in various aspects of ecology and fluvial geomorphology in order to determine the condition of the river and what effect changes in hydrology, mainly related to extraction for irrigation, will have. These inputs determine the outcomes of a Water Resource Plan (previously called a WAMP, now called a WRP). Socio-economic considerations are also mandatory under the Act but they are rarely if ever done and in

the Lower Balonne it was Smartrivers who undertook the relevant study and presented it to Government.

The TAP concluded that the Lower Balonne was severely ecologically degraded and this was as a result of water resource development. Cotton Australia sponsored an independent expert review of the TAP report and the review concluded that it was fundamentally unsound. Smartrivers also used expert consultants to review aspects of the region's hydrology and significant underestimates of flood flows were found. These were reported to Government and ignored until challenged in court.

The Anchorage V NRM hearing in the Land Court was a challenge by Smartrivers members of the hydrological and ecological basis of the Draft WAMP. NRM withdrew from the case after several days of evidence, we suspect because their own expert witnesses were actually in agreement with the contentions of Smartrivers. Despite a very clear outcome, NRM chose to print a colour glossy brochure saying that the result was not a problem and in fact the scientists on both sides were largely in agreement (with their case). This was so far from the truth that Smartrivers printed and distributed an alternative, truthful brochure.

NRM and the Minister then refused to consult with Smartrivers, instead choosing to develop planning options in isolation. They developed a number of options and used the CRC for Freshwater Ecology (CRCFE) as a sounding board and the CRC offered most support to "Option D" which was actually an option to resume Cubbie Station, a large cotton farm and irrigator in the region. The CRC's deliberations were not only based on the erroneous TAP report and error riddled IQQM, they again took no notice of Smartrivers critiques or the inputs of stakeholders. We now had an isolationist / academic approach. One of the results of this approach was the listing by the National Competition Council of the Condamine Balonne as a stressed river. We now know (refer to the Cullen review below) that such listing was incorrect and should never have occurred.

The proposed Cubbie resumption was a political disaster for Premier Peter Beattie. When he finally came to Cubbie and Dirranbandi he quickly realised what a stupid plan it was (inter-catchment transfer via a massive man made cross floodplain channel; "removing the best cow from the herd" was a commonly heard cliché at the time) and agreed with locals that an independent expert review of the science was warranted as the final arbitrator. He named Prof Peter Cullen as the reviewer. Smartrivers objected because Prof Cullen was Chair of the CRCFE and had made his own views clear on a number of occasions. Prof Russell Mein and Dr Richard Marchant were added to the Review team.

The report of the Cullen review has recently been made available and the key results unequivocally and completely support the contentions of Smartrivers with respect to ecology and largely support our contentions with respect to hydrology. The original TAP got it so far wrong that they concluded the Lower Balonne was severely degraded when in fact it is almost completely in Reference (best possible) condition (84% of sites tested in fact). The Review Panel also found no evidence of a decline in ecological condition as one progressed downstream and no evidence of a link to water resource development. Prof Cullen is to be congratulated for his honesty and openness during this process.

The most significant outcomes of the review from Smartrivers point of view are:

1. There is no point undertaking these water resource planning exercises without good scientific data upon which management decisions can be made (the excuse that decisions must be made urgently therefore we cant wait for better data is a joke, as clearly shown by the length of time taken to produce WRPs in Qld – in that time some very good data could have been collected). The clear winner from the Cullen Review is good science, as stated by Smartrivers members on a recent edition of Landline. This is not a debatable point.

2. The accepted best practice hydrological models produce estimates of flood event peaks with a 30-40% error. This is unacceptable for rural communities. Imagine a flood harvester going to a bank and saying the loan was based on an estimate which could be 40% wrong.
3. Local stakeholders MUST be intimately involved in the development of hydrological models and the entire planning process. The Review Panel was very strong on this point.
4. There is a clear need for independent peer review of the Government and academic outputs, or inputs, to such processes. Peer reviews at overview or policy level are a waste of time because the devil is in the detail. It took Smartrivers over 3 years, a court case and a guru level review to have the outcomes of such a reality check accepted by Government.

Smartrivers supports absolutely the concept of sustainability. To us, sustainability means that our community can maintain a perpetually acceptable standard of living through a way of life which is acceptable to us and does not impact upon the natural environment to an unacceptable level. Our definition of unacceptable would include, amongst other things, if it were no longer a pleasure to camp by our local rivers; if we could no longer readily catch fish or if we thought we needed to be concerned about contamination; if we no longer passed through significant areas of natural bush as we moved through the region; if we thought our actions had led to a species becoming extinct or if our local Aboriginal community were offended by our stewardship of the land. In the bigger picture, we are cognisant of the importance of protected natural areas and significant degradation of them would also fall within our definition of unacceptable. Land and water management has caused significant problems in various parts of Australia but our aim is to ensure that our practices are sustainable.

We were extremely concerned when told in TAP and WAMP documents that our river was severely degraded and that is why we sponsored our own environmental condition assessments and risk assessments. We should not have had to do it. An ounce of common sense, a reasonable consultative approach by Government and a peer review process which used practical scientists and stakeholders, would have avoided the need.

With respect to sustainability and terms of reference item 2, Smartrivers members are undertaking a number of water efficiency measures at the moment. One benefit of a drought is that you can work on your dams while they are empty. Many Smartrivers members are currently increasing the depth of their storages and dividing them into a number of cells. The reasons are:

- Deeper storages mean you can cut down on the surface area, and hence evaporation, of your stored water (in Qld the maximum legal height of non-referable dams has only recently changed from 5 to 8 metres and this simple change leads to saving huge amounts of water).
- Divided storages allows amalgamation of water as water levels drop, either as a result of usage or evaporation. Again this is a means of reducing surface area by putting the water in one cell on top of the water in another.
- The end result is more production from the same amount of extracted water, or, less water extracted next time because there is still some taking up space in storage.

The Government run storage at St George for example is relatively shallow so can never be as efficient with respect to water storage as can a deeper offstream storage.

The points above relate only to privately owned offstream storages and Smartrivers would like to advocate more use of this type of irrigation scheme. Large in-river storages which use the river as the conduit for transfer of water to users, are the major cause of degradation in our rivers. The Murray is a prime example. Offstream storages do not result in large blockages in the river effecting fish movement, changing water quality and altering the natural pattern of flooding. As water transfer from storage to field is also offstream, the impacts of flow regulation are avoided. As extraction from the rivers is only during flow, and usually flood, events, the seasonality of

flow in the rivers remains natural (the Murray for instance has a reversed seasonality because water is released down the river at times of year when it naturally would not be there). Flood harvesting to offstream storages is an example of working with nature to achieve a sustainable outcome and we hope the committee addresses it seriously as an option for design of future irrigation schemes.

One recent initiative of the Qld Government which does deserve commendation is the Rural Water Use Efficiency Scheme. Some of the experimental field trial results with respect to irrigation efficiency in our region have been very informative for farmers. These types of scheme and the local extension service offered behind them is extremely beneficial and should ensure implementation of the results. We believe Government at all levels should support these investigative schemes and the extension services which must follow behind. The CRC for Sustainable Irrigation, recently established, may be a vehicle for significant advancement, as long as it is kept practical and implementable and does not get lost in academic theory.

Smartdrivers supports the fundamental basis of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality which sees the bulk of funds and the responsibility for implementation rest with regional community groups. This would appear to be supported by the outcomes of the Cullen review. We recognise that we are the riparian landowners, we are the users of water, we store and irrigate with the water, we are the ones who have the capacity to stuff the system or to manage it in a sustainable manner.

The community recognises existing problems and future risk, wants to be involved in the solution and thereby determine their own future, will not tolerate policy or process-based decisions and wants practical realistic actions put in place based on sound science. This willingness to be involved should be grasped by government with both hands. If NAP or NHT2 funds were in any way siphoned off to support existing state government bureaucracies it would be a travesty.

The real risk here is that government is perceived as using the Precautionary Principle as the excuse, and the Expert Panel approach as the means, to implement policy rather than gather useful information for the purpose of informed decision-making. One argument used by government is that the need for action is urgent so they don't have the time to undertake significant data gathering. This is not substantiated by history with respect to the speed of implementation of WAMPs and WRPs in Queensland nor is it true in this catchment.

We thank the committee for its consideration of our response and members are available for comment should that be required.

Yours sincerely

RICHARD LOMMAN
President