



QUEENSLAND FARMERS' FEDERATION

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Submission

12 April 2018

Mr Andrew Broad MP
Chair, House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via email: Environment.Reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr Broad

Re: Inquiry into the management and use of Commonwealth environmental water

The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the united voice of intensive agriculture in Queensland. It is a federation that represents the interests of peak state and national agriculture industry organisations, which in turn collectively represent more than 13,000 primary producers across the state. QFF engages in a broad range of economic, social, environmental and regional issues of strategic importance to the productivity, sustainability and growth of the agricultural sector. QFF's mission is to secure a strong and sustainable future for Queensland farmers by representing the common interests of our member organisations:

- CANEGROWERS
- Cotton Australia
- Growcom
- Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland (NGIQ)
- Queensland Chicken Growers Association (QCGA)
- Queensland Dairyfarmers' Organisation (QDO)
- Australian Cane Farmers Association (ACFA)
- Flower Association
- Pork Queensland Inc.
- Queensland United Egg Producers (QUEP)
- Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group (BRIG)
- Burdekin River Irrigation Area Irrigators Ltd (BRIA)
- Central Downs Irrigators Ltd (CDIL)
- Pioneer Valley Water Cooperative Ltd (PV Water)
- Queensland Chicken Meat Council (QCMC).

QFF welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Committee's 'Inquiry into the management and use of Commonwealth environmental water' (the Inquiry). QFF provides this submission without prejudice to any additional submission provided by our members or individual farmers.

The united voice of intensive agriculture



Background

In responding to the terms of reference for the Inquiry, it is important that the Committee understands the approach that is adopted to plan and manage environmental water in the Queensland Murray-Darling.

Under the provisions of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan 2012, the Queensland Government is required to define annual environmental watering priorities for surface water in each water plan area. These priorities must specify watering priorities for environmental assets and ecosystem functions in accordance with the principles included in the Basin Plan, which also assists the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) to make decisions about the management and use of Commonwealth and other environmental water holdings.

This process must address the MDBA's Basin-wide environmental watering strategy and take into account the expected availability of 'planned' (rules-based defined in catchment water plans) and 'held' environmental water (entitlement-based held by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder). The annual environmental water priorities must be in accord with the long-term watering plan for each Commonwealth water resource plan area and the Commonwealth-accredited water resource plan when in place.

Queensland's annual environmental watering priorities for the Basin address environmental watering arrangements provided for under the existing Queensland Murray-Darling Basin catchment transitional water plans. These annual priorities aim to protect and if possible restore natural flow regimes to support high value environmental assets and critical ecosystem functions. This approach is similar to that prescribed for the Basin Plan. The transitional plans recognise the need to strike a balance with meeting industry and the community needs for secure and reliable water supplies.

In early 2016, the new water plan for the Warrego, Paroo and Nebine catchments was finalised under Queensland law and in June 2017 it formed part of the first water resource plan in the Basin to be accredited by the Commonwealth Minister.

The transitional water plans, and in particular the associated resource operations plans (ROPs), define water sharing rules, infrastructure operating rules and flow event management rules. These rules are designed to achieve specific environmental flow objectives at selected nodes within each river catchment to support identified environmental assets and ecosystem functions, while maintaining the performance of consumptive water entitlements. Like the water plans, ROPs are developed based on scientific investigation and widespread community engagement.

This rules-based approach for the provision of 'planned' environmental water is appropriate for the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin catchments which have ephemeral watercourses and wetlands compared with the southern Basin. This significantly limits using in-stream storage infrastructure to regulate flow, which makes it difficult provide water on an annual basis to targeted priority environmental assets and ecosystem functions. However, this approach is suited to providing environmental water as part of variable natural flows to meet longer term environmental objectives and outcomes.

Environmental water which has been recovered by the Commonwealth in the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin are 'held' as entitlements by the Commonwealth Government and managed by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH). Most of this water is unsupplemented (unregulated) water allocation which can be taken at specific flows levels. Only a small volume of supplemented (regulated) water allocation is held in the Border Rivers plan area. The availability of this water depends upon the availability of water stored in dams managed within water supply schemes and the volumes that can be taken in any year are subject to defined instantaneous, daily, annual and multi-year volumetric limits.

QFF's response will address the implications of above for terms of reference for the Inquiry.

1. Maximising the use of environmental water for the protection and restoration of environmental assets

Held environmental water is best used in the Queensland Murray-Darling to enhance natural flows of planned environmental water given the ephemeral nature of water courses and wetlands. It is recognised that held water could be used to address localised environmental needs.

One example is action taken some years ago to purchase water stored in ring tanks in the Lower Balonne for release to improve seasonal supply for the Narran Lakes. Other opportunities may involve construction of in structures to divert water flowing across the floodplains. However, even these localised options are limited and costly unless there is infrastructure that is already in place to allow supplementation or relocation of natural flows.

Alternatives to maximising environmental water flows are needed in the Queensland Murray-Darling. Cotton Australia's submission highlights the need for a commitment to investigate and implement measures that will complement hydrological solutions. Cotton Australia points particularly to measures which address turbidity, fish, vegetation, macroinvertebrate, and physical form.

QFF supports Cotton Australia's conclusions that environmental improvement will only occur when a multi-faceted approach is taken and a range of 'toolkit' and/or 'complementary' measures are implemented. This approach was part of the recommendations from the Northern Basin Review amendments which were rejected by the Senate on 14 February 2018.

2. Considering innovative approaches for the use of environmental water

The Commonwealth *Water Act 2007* has been amended to allow the CEWH to trade environmental water and make use of the funds for further water acquisitions or environmental activities. This is an important initiative which should allow trading of environmental water not required under some seasonal conditions. It could also provide funding for the implementation of complementary measures.

As outlined in the introduction to this submission, held water entitlements in the Queensland Murray-Darling catchment are water allocations which are tradable subject to conditions defined in the transitional water plans, ROPs and Basin planning.

3. Monitoring and evaluating outcomes of the use of environmental water

The process of review and accreditation of Queensland Murray-Darling Basin catchment plans will provide the opportunity for better planning and management of environmental watering needs, giving regard to the improved science generated by the Northern Basin Scientific Review. It would be expected that the planning review will also put in place improved monitoring programs for environmental priorities and a process of 5 yearly review to evaluate the performance of the catchment plans regarding environmental and consumptive water issues.

While it would be expected that the plan reviews would focus primarily on flow related measures, it is recommended that consideration be given to additional monitoring programs for trials of a range of selected complementary measures assessed as being suitable for implementation in areas of environmental significance in catchments. For example, flood plain areas.

4. Options for improving community engagement and awareness of the way in which environmental water is managed

There has been extensive community engagement during the conduct of the Northern Basin Scientific Review. It was understood that this detailed scientific review addressed the significant gaps in the science so that catchment planning in the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin could proceed. If this is not the case, there will have to be a major upgrade in community engagement to explain the next steps in the basin and catchment planning process.

5. Other issues

Roles for planning and managing environmental flows:

There is some concern about an unclear definition of roles for the setting of environmental watering priorities between the MDBA and the CEWH. It is understood that this is resulting in unnecessary duplication of effort.

It is recommended that the roles of the MDBA and the CEWH are clarified and operating arrangements put in place to remove any duplication.

Compliance and water metering:

The Four Corners program “Pumped” in late July 2017 has initiated investigations into compliance, metering and the management of environmental water, particularly on the Barwon-Darling.

The Queensland Government is currently undertaking an Independent Audit of Water Measurement and Compliance across the state, not just in the Queensland Murray-Darling catchments.

QFF supports the conduct of this audit which aims to investigate any limitations of the current management arrangements and to make recommendations regarding improvements that may be necessary. The audit will also contribute to the Commonwealth Government’s independent review of the ABC Four Corners program.

The scope of the audit is comprehensive covering the adequacy of governance and regulation, and metering and measurement required to implement water plans and regulations. Effective management of compliance and water measurement and monitoring technology will also be investigated. Recommendations for improvements is to include estimates of the costs of establishing and operating proposed reforms.

If you have any queries regarding this submission, please contact Ian Johnson at ian@qff.org.au or Dr Georgina Davis at georgina@qff.org.au.

Yours sincerely

Travis Tobin
Chief Executive Officer