

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water

Colac — 10 November 2017

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Witness

Mr Cameron Steele, coordinator, People for A Living Moorabool.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon and welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee's public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water. Can I extend a welcome to members of the public here today and members of the media, and a particularly warm welcome to members of grade 6 at Sacred Heart Primary School in Colac. I have your local member next to me, the member for Polwarth, and of course one of your upper house local members, the Deputy Chair, Mr Simon Ramsay.

The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water, and evidence is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected for what you say here today but if you go outside and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

I would now like to welcome Mr Cameron Steele. Today's evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with proof versions of the transcript at the earliest opportunity. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. I invite you to proceed with a 5-minute opening statement, which will be followed by questions from members of the committee. Can I first ask that you state your name and role for the record.

Mr STEELE — My name is Cameron Steele. I am the coordinator for People for A Living Moorabool. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. As detailed in our written submission, People for A Living Moorabool is a grassroots group which formed in 2008 in response to the dire straits of the Moorabool River, which was then and we believe still is the most flow-stressed river in the state. We determined our focus to be the right of this magnificent but highly stressed river to an effective environmental flow and that our commitment to be a voice for the river would override any support for rights of particular water users.

PALM successfully lobbied to have an environmental entitlement for the Moorabool River that had been detailed in the central region sustainable water strategy brought forward from its original date. We continue to raise awareness of the plight of this river and push for actions which will better secure it a conservative future, with substantial and long-term water flows as well as improved land management in its catchment.

Our group is made up of non-agency people and includes those from communities along the whole length of the Moorabool and beyond. As private citizens we continue to educate ourselves to better appreciate the many factors that have forced flows in this river to decline to the extent that they have. We rely on the scientific work of others to inform what we see as the most pressing priorities for this river. It is this literature along with the collective on-ground knowledge of many of our supporters, including people whose lives have been connected to this river for several generations, which serve to support the positions we have taken.

In 2005 Peter Greig, the then chair of the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, warned that:

Unchecked, the trend is for the Moorabool to become little more than a drain, with consequent impacts downstream in the Barwon, in Lake Connemare, and on the coast.

We hope that through our submission we are able to give a perspective on how pivotal even a modest environmental allocation has been in stalling and hopefully reversing this trajectory. It is our experience that this allocation has driven renewed hope for the future of the river, not only within the wider community but also within the agencies tasked with its care.

For PALM one of the most positive things to come out of the provision of an environmental allocation for the river is the strengthening cooperation between the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, Barwon Water and Central Highlands Water. This has allowed the allocation to be markedly more effective than it might otherwise have been. We have also welcomed the efforts made by Southern Rural Water in addressing some of the factors that continue to threaten what is left of the flows within the Moorabool River, although there is much work still to be done.

PALM is calling for this positive momentum to be maintained. The science says the Moorabool River requires 20 000 megalitres less water to be extracted annually to maintain and enhance non-human life forms that depend on it. The current allocation is 2500 megalitres. As new water sources and efficiencies are found there needs to be a further allocation reserved for this stressed river, permitting more water to be left within it to sustain dependent species and to assist in building the river's resilience to drought and forecast impacts of

climate change. Strengthening compliance, regularly reassessing extraction volumes by water authorities and addressing the growth of dams — particularly lifestyle dams — and exploring the opportunities for consolidating farm dams are measures that would assist in preserving the impact of environmental flows within the Moorabool River. Ultimately though it is future urban, agricultural and industrial demands for water that the river needs to be most protected from, and securing environmental allocations will play a huge role.

We are grateful to have our submission accepted by this committee for consideration, and we again thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to attempt to answer any questions you may have of us. We also wish to extend an invitation to any committee members who would like to visit the Moorabool and hear more from others within our group, as well as to experience the river firsthand. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Cameron, and thank you for your submission. I will ask the first question. I note that in 2004 SKM completed a comprehensive analysis of the river and found that there were significant impacts around overallocation, urban storage dams, farm dams and groundwater extraction. Can you outline for me — and you have done it in some way already in the submission — at what point was the river and the river system at when that study was done, and what improvements have we seen since then as result of additional environmental flows?

Mr STEELE — I cannot give you a perspective from the CCMA and the figures involved, but locally what spurred a lot of action on the river was seeing the river year after year with really reduced flows. There were swimming holes that people use to enjoy for generations. Part of that was through the millennial drought, but it has been a progressive decline within the river.

From local memory, I live in Bannockburn and my wife grew up in Russells Bridge, and if you talk to a lot of the locals there who have been on the river for generations, it was the construction of the Lal Lal Reservoir on the Moorabool River which really did herald a real decline in the fortunes of the river, especially downstream of that dam. In comparison, a lot of people from this area would know the West Barwon Dam. If you talk to people within Geelong and they do know where their water comes from, quite often they will flag the West Barwon Dam as that source. The Lal Lal Reservoir is nearly three times the size on a river with a third of the capacity. That gives you some indication of what has put this river under the stress that it finds itself under now.

The CHAIR — As we move forward obviously, and it is alluded to as well in the submission, there is a whole range of stresses and pressures that the river system comes under. No doubt population growth and all of the factors that contribute to water use and management need to be considered in our findings and recommendations. If you were in our position, and on this committee, can you give me some sort of indication as to what would be one or a couple of key findings that you would recommend that we take to the Parliament and effectively to the government? Are you able to say: ‘This is what I would recommend through the use of better governance and management of environmental water’?

Mr STEELE — I think there are opportunities, especially with Landcare groups and water authorities, to explore tying land improvement in with environmental flows. The environmental flows that were achieved through the central region sustainable water strategy were basically only allowed to come from the Lal Lal Reservoir. There are at least nine other storages on the system, most of those providing urban water, and to have an environmental allocation in each of those that was tied to land improvements — as in fencing and revegetation — I think would be a huge step in advancing the fortunes of the river.

The Moorabool is the prime example of facing the issue of farm dams. I know it has been unpalatable, but within the Moorabool system the impact of farm dams is huge. We do not want to see farm dams banned, but we certainly see that there is a lot of momentum within the catchment to consolidate farm dams. If somebody stuck their hand up for a farm dam, if there was some way of trading that off with somebody who was prepared to decommission a dam, we would love to see a scheme like that within the system.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you, Cameron. I have had the benefit of having Cameron in my office talking about the Moorabool River and some of its challenges. You have part answered my question. I am just trying to get an understanding from you. We know that Moorabool has been stressed — it has been stressed as long as I can remember, for a variety of reasons. But long term how do you see it being sustainable, other than providing more environmental flow water or bulking up the bulk entitlement, if you like, to allow more environmental flows? The farm dams aside, what else do you see could make that river more sustainable in the future?

Mr STEELE — I alluded to it when I mentioned cordial relationships with Landcare. Part of our water plan submission was that there are large tracts of the Moorabool River which have very little vegetation. To have a community excited about potentially revegetating an area with the promise that once a certain percentage of it was done there would be an environmental water allocation made for that section of the river, in our discussions with various Landcare groups that seems to have been a real thing that they feel they could get hold of and run with. Quite often farmers talk about doing something on their property and then seeing the neighbour then step up and do something on the neighbouring property. If they could be brought around the river — the river really is quite central to a lot of the farms because it is a long, thin catchment; most farms are pretty close to the river and have some involvement with it — I think that has got a real potential for bringing some great change within the river.

Mr RIORDAN — Just on the dam issue, and to fully understand the appendix that was supplied to us, when we look here at the percentage of dams as a percentage of the annual stream flows, that means a couple of things to me. One is that the Moorabool catchment has more than twice the amount that the next closest catchment area has being caught in farm dams, so it is relatively very high. The next point is that is: of those dams, does Corangamite catchment or Southern Rural Water have a stocktake, if you like, as to how much of that stock is domestic or whether it is irrigation?

Mr STEELE — Southern Rural Water would.

Mr RIORDAN — Do they actually have that detail?

Mr STEELE — They have details on the large irrigation dams.

Mr RIORDAN — There would not be a lot of high-scale irrigation out of that area, would there?

Mr STEELE — There is a lot of irrigation around the Moorabool, yes.

Mr RIORDAN — Centre pivots and so on?

Mr STEELE — Certainly surface water, but there are also some dams used for storing groundwater. But if you take a Google Earth flight over the Lal Lal Creek, which is the major tributary into the Moorabool River, dam after dam after dam just steps all the way up the creek. It is really heavily populated with dams. The interesting thing is that you are not seeing the water authority dams in that appendix. The water authority dams, including the dams at Stony Rises, which is supplied from the Moorabool system, and White Swan, they are over 100 000 megalitres, which you could add to the storage capacity there. We are talking about a river with annual capacity of 97 000 megalitres.

Mr RIORDAN — Essentially the whole year's flow can be stored, or well in excess of it.

Mr STEELE — Well in excess, so it does have to be addressed. I know in the past governments have made valiant attempts, but I think certainly the Moorabool system would be one system where you could probably step up. We had a meeting in Meredith around the water plan, and having discussions with farmers, most of them acknowledge that, yes, we have got to pull farm dams up. Speaking to Southern Rural Water, a dam has to be on a blue line, it has to have a 90-hectare attachment, before it comes under their auspices. Smaller dams, including the lifestyle dams, are a real issue, because there is very little control. The councils have some control, but within the Moorabool system, we have recorded since the SKM report came out, we are just picking new dam after new dam, 15 to 20 megs here — all the rest of it. This is part of our submission — that we have got environmental flow that is looking to reverse the trajectory but that is being eroded by more and more farm dams going in. It does need to be addressed. I think if we ever want to get fair dinkum about a river like the Moorabool — and I think the Moorabool is the canary in the coalmine, so to speak; it is at that very hard edge of where other rivers could head, and I think it is a river worth addressing.

Mr RIORDAN — So there has been some environmental flow improvement in the last five to six years.

Mr STEELE — Yes.

Mr RIORDAN — What megs have we got?

Mr STEELE — Two and a half thousand megs per annum. That is just straight out of Lal Lal. It was supposed to have been just a thousand, but we lobbied pretty hard to get the extra 1500 up. Each allocation was supposed to be tied with accessing — for instance, the Jan Juc bore fields, once that water came online, it was to free up water for the Moorabool. There is appetite within government to say, ‘If there is a new water source or if we find better efficiencies, then let us —

Mr RIORDAN — So the access to the desal has not come into it?

Mr STEELE — It has. That was part of the —

Mr RIORDAN — Because the Gerangamete bore field lobbied here, or argued very much, now that Geelong, for example, has access to that, that that should be cutting back on.

Mr STEELE — Fully agree, if you look at what happens with Boundary Creek and the peat fields and all the rest of it.

Mr RIORDAN — Yours would be a similar argument.

Mr STEELE — We have got a very local and very good example. The Lethbridge intensive agricultural precinct was put in with money from the state government and the shire. I have got no problems with intensive agriculture going in, with jobs and all the rest of it, but what it did was earmark 900 megalitres from the Moorabool system. Now that is not extra to the bulk entitlements, but Barwon Water had committed to reducing their dependence on the Moorabool system. Now that we have got that 900 megs earmarked annually, the chances are for water then to flow down to not only the environment but businesses lower down the Moorabool. We were interviewing a winemaker the other day who really is suffering through lack of adequate flows year on, year out. The chances for him to get environmental or passing flows past his place have been diminished by the agricultural precinct.

We continue to pick at this low fruit. Meanwhile, we have got the Bannockburn sewage treatment plant. Barwon Water is buying up more land to get rid of excess water. We are saying it is time to put the Moorabool aside and say, ‘We’re not going for this low fruit anymore’. Barwon Water has described it as gravity-fed cheap water, but in the end it has obviously gone well past its limits. We have to look at possibly more expensive avenues for water, and that includes looking at recycling et cetera. This really to us is a pivotal system that hopefully can change the approach and mindset that we have.

Mr O’SULLIVAN — Thank you, Mr Steele, for coming in. I have just got one question. Obviously these sorts of situations are complex because there are many different stakeholders involved, and depending on which stakeholder group that you are a part of, you have a different take on the debate than what someone does on the other side. In particular you have got Southern Rural Water, you have got Corangamite CMA that you are trying to deal with in terms of water. One of the concerns is there is not more water being created, so if the water is going to be redistributed into a particular flow, that means it has got to come from somewhere else. You say here in your conclusion that one of the threats is from human demands for extraction. How do we get the balance right, because if you achieve what you are after, that means someone else loses out? How do we get that balance right?

Mr STEELE — I think ultimately it is the cost of water. Water authorities are obviously under a lot of pressure to provide the cheapest water they can provide. Barwon Water supplies farms throughout the Moorabool catchment. What happens with that water though is it is actually taken from the Upper Moorabool and then piped down, so the river does not see any of it out of the East Moorabool. You are right in that people do miss out, but at the moment there is not only the environment but farms and businesses at the Lower Moorabool, including vineyards, that are missing out because of the extraction in the top of the catchment.

If we look at a flow — Barwon Water’s release out of Lal Lal Reservoir, which is for potable water to be taken down to the treatment plant — our environmental flows are actually piggybacked on top. You have got dual use for water, and the fact that if you are letting that water down the system, not only is it providing an environmental benefit but it is also then being used for urban use and farms and businesses, I think that is a way of thinking about it, rather than thinking, this water that is from the top of the catchment, which does not see the river at all, it really does not get that dual use benefit. That dual use is a philosophy I think we need to really approach and embrace. The fisheries chap before us, we were having a bit of a discussion earlier. People’s

connections to rivers and all the rest of it, it is important. I note that the Yarra recently was set up as an entity unto itself.

I speak to a lot of farmers — you talk about competing interests — but there are a lot of farmers who are really supportive of action on the Moorabool, and they look at the river as a river. I think we have probably got to get that over the line as well. Quite often you can narrow your focus to what bit of the river is going past your front door, and if it is not looking as it should be, then you get up in arms. But I think more and more people are starting to conceive of rivers as the whole entity, and then the appetite for putting more flows down the river I think will come. I think people too accept there is a cost. At the meeting on the bore fields here, Barwon Water put the question: ‘If we were to stop pumping from these bore fields and it added an extra \$70 annually to your bill, how would you feel?’. I do not want to speak for the whole room, but I would say most of them were very much for it. I think there is a sense of if you are going to put a water bill up, it has to be for a decent cause, and we would contend that the Moorabool is certainly a decent cause.

The CHAIR — Cameron, thank you for being here, for your submission and for answering questions from committee members. We greatly appreciate it.

Committee adjourned.