# ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

## Inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water

Shepparton — 24 October 2017

Members

Mr Josh Bull — Chair
Mr Simon Ramsay — Deputy Chair
Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny
Mr Luke O'Sullivan
Mr Tim Richardson
Mr Richard Riordan
Mr Daniel Young

Witnesses

Cr Peter Mansfield, Chair, Region 2, and
Mr Angus Verley, Senior Officer, Murray Darling Association.

**The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Halfpenny)** — Next up, we have the Murray Darling Association.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Good afternoon, my name is Peter Mansfield. I am chair of region 2. I come from Yarrawonga. I am a townie, not a rural-type person, although Yarrawonga is rural.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Before we go on, there are a few formalities in terms of parliamentary privilege and all that now that I should go through and I think you were in the audience so you know who we are. First of all, thanks for coming and we just need to let you know that the evidence you are providing today is being recorded. Copies of the transcript will be sent to you, the proofs, to look at and check for accuracy before they are published. Anything that you say in this hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege. However, whatever you say outside the hearing is not covered by parliamentary privilege. So with that then, you will present to us and then you will give us plenty of time hopefully to ask questions.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — I am a councillor with Moira Shire Council. I have been the chair of region 2, which covers this area here and right up to Deniliquin, Campaspe shire, Shepparton city, Strathbogie, Moira shire and a few shires on both sides of the river. We have got Angus, he is an employee of the Murray Darling Association, whose headquarters are at Echuca. We have an apology from David Thurley, who is our chair, and also Emma Bradbury, who is our CEO. I would also like to recognise Suzanna Sheed here as well and I would like to congratulate Suzanna Sheed for getting water off page 15 onto page 1. Excellent.

As I say, I am a townie from Yarrawonga. We have the most important diversion weir on the Murray-Darling system. Fifty per cent of the water that comes to Yarrawonga gets diverted down either a canal going to Deniliquin on the New South Wales side or a canal on the Victorian side that services Cobram and associated areas and butts up against the canal from Nagambie, which services the Goulburn Valley. That is where we are. This region 2, this area here, I believe is the most important part of the food bowl of the Murray-Darling Basin. You have already got an electronic copy of the MDA — Murray Darling Association — submission.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — We have got that here.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — I would like the panel to understand the constraints that the Murray presents itself when we are talking about environmental water. The commonwealth Environmental Water Office would like the Barmah forest flooded seven out of 10 years. We have got no problem with that.

I will go back a bit. I was born in Yarrawonga. I have noticed the deterioration of the Murray River going past Yarrawonga for the last 60 years. I am nearly 72 now. When I was 12 we used to be able to duck dive and see about 15 to 20 feet in the water without goggles or anything. Now you are lucky to see about 3 or 4 feet. So I have recognised that — the deterioration of the river over the years. I am very passionate about the condition of the river. Now, getting back to the constraints that the Murray River takes, as far as environmental water is concerned, is that the Barmah Choke — are we all aware of the Barmah Choke?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — I will explain. The Barmah Choke, without flooding the wetlands beside it, can only carry 12 000 megalitres of water per day, which is the normal summer irrigation demand, and that is the absolute limit. In the Yarrawonga from the Hume weir, they have got an easement on either side of the river to release 25 000 megalitres of water per day during the irrigation season. When it gets to Yarrawonga, 13 000 megalitres per day is diverted either down the Mulwala Canal or the Victorian canal, and 12 000 megalitres comes down the river, which is the absolute maximum without flooding the Barmah forest. At the moment in the Barmah forest they have got barrages at the entrance of the creeks from the Barmah forest into the river to stop water going back up the creek because of the high water.

Now, we were talking about blackwater events before. We believe that blackwater events are caused by a lack of environmental water, lack of high water, obviously, and not frequent enough water. If we want to flood the Barmah forest, there is not a problem with that. However, if we want to flood, say, the Gunbower forest or forests further down, the maximum amount of water you can have is 12 000 megs going past at the Barmah Choke. Therefore the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder and the Victorian Environmental Water Holder will have to cooperate to send environmental down the Goulburn, which enters the Murray below the choke, so we can get high water down further down the river. So I am just trying to articulate —

**The ACTING CHAIR** — What is needed, I guess.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — what the constraints are. As I say, we used to get high water before the upgrade of the Hume reservoir, which was done in 1956, and the advent of the Snowy Mountains scheme, which was finished in about 1972, and also the construction of Dartmouth Dam. We used to get high water probably three out of five going past Yarrawonga. Then it got to two out of five, two out of seven, and now we are lucky to get probably one out of seven.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — What would you like to see in terms of the water strategy in this area. So you want more water going into environmental water.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — I am probably speaking personally here — definitely environment water. The catchment management authority in the Goulburn is kicking a lot of goals with the golden perch project.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — They did talk about that, yes.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — They are kicking terrific goals, and it has been proved that they are kicking goals. Now, there is no reason why we cannot do that in the Murray, similarly to what has been happening in the Goulburn.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — What do you think, because I know earlier you were talking about it being the food bowl. How do you balance that —

**Cr MANSFIELD** — I personally would like to see high water going past Yarrawonga probably three out of five. As the catchment management authority indicated, there is probably not enough environmental water to be able to do that, unfortunately.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — So where do you see, as you mentioned earlier, the food industry in this area fitting in with —

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Obviously we have got to be more efficient with the water we have got in the irrigation industry. I have just come back from a conference in Renmark with the Murray Darling Association. They are kicking a lot of goals in South Australia. Just as an example, there is one particular farm that had 17 hectares, which is not a very big farm, of vines which used to send 90 tonne a year to a winery. They have done a modernisation of his property — gone from overhead sprinklers to drips, et cetera. He is now producing, with less water — it has cost him nil — 200 tonne a year. It has doubled.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — And you think there is a capacity here to preserve more water or do more —

**Cr MANSFIELD** — We have got to get into that more down this way, because we have got to adapt some of the technology from overseas, especially Israel, which are leaders in the field of irrigation with less water. We have got to adapt a lot of that technology that they have got.

**Mr RIORDAN** — Just a quick question: your being a Yarrawonga man — I am not a regular visitor to Yarrawonga, but it prides itself I think on recreation and tourism and so on — what effect does your wish for more environmental flows, three out of five or an increase in ratios, do to water levels and recreational water availability to your community specifically? There is that conflict: more water there means less somewhere else.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — For the lake, for example, nil, because it is a constant-level lake. Down the river, the environmental water would not be done in the prime tourist season. Obviously it would be done in late winter or early spring, which is the best time for environmental water. I would say personally — I am also on the tourist association of Yarrawonga — it would have very, very little effect, if any, on tourism.

**Mr RIORDAN** — On tourism?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — On tourism.

**Mr RIORDAN** — But it would come at the cost of agriculture?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — I do not believe so. I cannot see how. It is environmental water; it is not water that they own. The only land that it would flood would be wetlands, which are usually state forest, or on the Victorian side very, very little freehold land would be affected by high levels of water in the Murray system — and we are

probably only talking about 40 000 megs a day. That is the story. The last October flood, in 2016, we had 110 000 megs a day going past Yarrawonga.

**Mr RIORDAN** — That is in a flood flow, the 110?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Yes.

**Mr RIORDAN** — What is it in a dry summer flow?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — And all that did was flood the golf course at Yarrawonga, or on one of the courses it hit the golf club.

**Mr RIORDAN** — And what is the flow in a dry summer flow? If you are 110 —

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Twelve thousand megs.

**Mr RIORDAN** — So it goes from 12 to 110?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Yes, and that did have a detrimental effect on the tourism industry because it was late; it was in October rather than, say, August–September.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — Thank you for coming in and providing some evidence to us today. I just want to touch on the Murray-Darling Basin plan, which we know has been fairly controversial, particularly in its infancy. We are working our way through that now, obviously with the water that has been taken out of production and has gone to the environment. The whole idea was to have a bit of a balance on the way through. Some think we have gone too far; some think we have not gone far enough. What are your views in terms of the balance of the Murray-Darling Basin plan? In terms of putting more water down the river, as you indicate, Cr Mansfield, that water has got to come from somewhere, and currently that water is being used for a productive purpose. As we know with the delicate balancing act with water up in this part of the world, the water just does not come from thin air, it is allocated somewhere already. Do you think that we have not got that balance right and we need to put more water into the environment?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — The Murray Darling Association are fully committed to the Murray-Darling Basin plan as it stands and all the adjunct with it. The Murray Darling Association is fully committed to the Murray-Darling Basin plan. To that extent I think, by that commitment, the Murray Darling Association believe that the balance is pretty right.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — So it is just your opinion that there should more water coming out of production to go down the river for the environment?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Definitely not.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — Okay. You are not saying that.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — My view is that we have got to adapt to technology so that, as I quoted from the South Australian scenario, we get the same production, if not more, with less water so that that farm can be more efficient. The most inefficient use of irrigation water is flood irrigation; everyone knows that.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — So what should happen? Just following your scenario, that the farm becomes more efficient with its water, are you then saying that that water should be taken away from that farmer and taken away from production to go down the river?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — It should be given to the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, yes.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — Why should it be given to them when it is currently being used for production?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — If you can improve the productivity of the farm with less water, which you —

**The ACTING CHAIR** — You will not need more.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — You are getting more with less. There is obviously a cost to that, and someone has got to pay for the improvement of the farm. The water is currently about $2000 a megalitre on the open market. If they spend half a million dollars improving their farm and they can do it with, say, 250 megs a year less, it is a cost-neutral situation for the farmer, but the water is saved.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — Which could go potentially to other production.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — For sure; not a problem.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — So it does not necessarily have to go to the environment.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — In my personal opinion I would like to see it go to the environment, but I do not disagree that it could go to further production.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — Because we have seen up in this part of the world, and Suzanna would know better than the rest of us would, in terms of the cost of water that has been taken out of production now, it is, what, 2000 jobs and $500 million?

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Yes, no worries.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — So taking any further water out of production comes at a significant cost, and we have heard from Goulburn Murray Water today that, for instance, if the up-water, that 450 gigalitres, was taken out of production, it would make the whole system unviable.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — For them, yes. That is right. In our shire, Moira shire, we have lost 20 per cent of our water. It has been taken out of production because farmers have just sold their water to the commonwealth when they were in the buyback situation. That flow-on effect — what Suzanna Sheed obviously alluded to earlier — is what we are on about it. But that has happened. That is a fact of life. You cannot get that water back, unless with water efficiencies: we sell the water back to farms that want to re-enter the irrigation game.

**Mr O'SULLIVAN** — Yes. I guess the point that I am making is to take any more water of production, there are costs associated with that in terms of jobs and financial viability of the whole system. If we are trying to get the balance right, I am just a bit nervous about taking any further water away, particularly through that 450 gigalitres of up-water, which I think would be devastating for the district.

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Yes, I could not agree more. And in that 450 gigalitres to go down the river, if it is done up this way, it is constrained by the Barmah Choke. At the moment the Barmah Choke is about that far from the top of the Barmah forest. If you get a wave action of a speedboat going past, it washes water onto the land. In one way the Barmah Choke has been very beneficial to the Moira shire because of the constraints of transferring water from above the choke to below the choke. At the moment if I had surplus water, I could not sell it to anyone below the choke because they cannot transfer it down there, because all the water going through the choke is already committed and they cannot send any more down.

**Mr VERLEY** — If I could just jump in there, probably a major aspect of our submission is that with the water that the commonwealth and Victorian environmental water holders have already got it is the MDA's submission that while there is some level of consultation through the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office local engagement officers and through the equivalent of the Victorian environmental water office, there could be a greater degree of consultation so that that water is better targeted, so you are achieving better outcomes with the same amount of water. As a peak body for local government, it is our submission that a lot of that consultation could be done through local government. I think the previous speakers were talking about it being difficult to have enough people on the ground to know when and where watering should take place. All local governments already have environmental officers, technical officers and operations directors. They are the most connected to their local communities, and a lot of those people already have a lot of that knowledge, which is probably being under-utilised at the moment.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — How would you see that working? Where would they connect into, and how would they do that? Through submissions a lot of people have been saying, 'How do you get the information through?'. You need more local people or people on the ground, but then do how do you actually get it to where it needs to go and have it be properly considered, I suppose?

**Mr VERLEY** — A bit of background about us — we are a peak body for local government in the Murray-Darling Basin. We offer membership to all local governments in the basin — about 167 councils. It would be our position that through the MDA, through us, we could be that vehicle for consultation.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Okay. You also talked about education as another recommendation. Do you want to expand a little bit on that just quickly?

**Mr VERLEY** — Through us we would see a greater opportunity for two-way communication. Just talking nuts and bolts, we have got mailing lists and contacts with all of those local governments. We can be a conduit for that information coming out of the Victorian environmental water office or the commonwealth office, passing all of that on to our member councils. Probably on that point it is mentioned in our submission that we have actually got a relationship similar to that with the FRDC at the moment on the National Carp Control Plan. We have partnered with them on their stakeholder engagement strategy, so they are essentially using our channels of communication to get the message out about the NCCP.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — Thank you very much for coming in today and for providing that information. If we have any further questions we may —

**Cr MANSFIELD** — Thank you very much for allowing us to put a submission in. It is much appreciated. If you want any further information or a bit of a look at the Barmah Choke, we would be more than happy to provide the opportunity for you to come up and see, on the ground, the Barmah Choke. It is very important.

**The ACTING CHAIR** — We would like to do that.

**Witnesses withdrew.**