

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water

Kerang — 13 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

Mr Neville Goulding, and

Ms Melanie Tranter.

The CHAIR — 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. I extend a warm welcome to members of the public and members of the media who may be present, and a particularly warm welcome to students from grades 5 and 6, I understand, from Kerang South Primary School. Thank you all for being here.

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. Today’s evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof 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 committee members. Before you start, I ask you to state your name and job title.

Mr GOULDING — Neville Goulding.

Ms TRANTER — Melanie Tranter.

Mr GOULDING — We are just community people.

The CHAIR — Thanks. Over to you for a 5-minute statement, if you would like. Do you have a presentation? Terrific. Even better. We have a visual.

Visual presentation.

Mr GOULDING — Yes, we are basically talking about the Gunbower forest and the environmental watering thereof. It is a result of the wetlands of it. Watering of the forests has huge environmental benefits socially and economically — but only if we capitalise on its potential. Approximately 28 gigalitres or \$8.4 million of water was used in 2015 in the Gunbower forest. That water could have produced \$14 million of milk or \$140 million if used for horticulture. It could have created 1800 jobs. Further, the 450 gigalitres of up-water which has been proposed or looked at being taken out of the consumptive pool will have a detrimental effect on the permanent plantings. In particular during a drought year there will not be enough water for the permanent plantings, let alone the dairy industry, and so some of those will go to the wall.

These are some of Goulding’s young stock, and basically what we are saying here is that we manage our water on our farms as efficiently as we can, and environmental water should be used or managed in the same way. In particular in a year of low irrigation allocation it would be a great outcome to free up the environmental water for irrigation and then return it in a year of plenty. The environment basically can manage itself during a drought or a dry period, whereas industry, in particular dairy and even permanent plantings, struggle. The environmental water holder should also be able to use the dollars it gets when it sells water for environmental benefit rather than just buying water. An example of that would be fish ladders on the Gunbower Creek at Koondrook and Cohuna and the top end of the creek rather than having to purchase more water.

So we have got this water — we have used it, we are growing stuff out in the forest — but then we need to manage it. Kangaroos, with all the extra feed produced by the water out there, become too many, and when the feed gets short they head out to the farmers, so they are costing farmers and motorists dollars. There is a real opportunity to cull them sustainably and use that meat for human consumption. They are an excellent meat — my wife buys it regularly — and it is also a very healthy meat, so it should be used for human consumption rather than just simply farmers at the moment getting a permit and shooting them but having to leave them on the ground to rot, which is ridiculous. Pest plants and animals need to be controlled, in particular the foxes. We have got a good environment with our environmental water for turtles and fish, in particular the turtles, and foxes come along and not only eat the turtles but also eat the eggs, so we need to be able to control those.

Fishways in particular are really important to us and need to be installed to allow the fingerlings that the environmental water creates to be able to migrate up the creek and not die at the bottom of the weir. If you go out at the bottom of Koondrook weir when it is down, you will find small yellowbelly dead there because they have not been able to go up. We need a fishway there and also at Cohuna and up the top. Once the carp herpes is released we will need dollars to clean them up. We also need the community involved, and we need a really

good plan to make sure they do not have a huge impact on the community. Without investing in those sorts of things, we are not using that environmental water efficiently.

Here is an example of just far too many trees in the forest. They really do need to be thinned. We also need sustainable harvesting of the good trees — in other words to make sure that we get a decent-looking forest but also to minimise the fire risk. As we get drier — as we are well aware, fire is becoming a big problem throughout our forests and parks — we need to manage the forests very well.

Tourism is a huge opportunity with the environmental water. We have a great natural environment, and with cultural heritage, camping, fishing et cetera there, we really need to take advantage of that. We also need to improve the online information for all types of tourists. I had a couple of guys from Queensland and one from down south getting together. They had camped out in the forest as youngsters, but they could not get any information on riding their bikes from Yarrowonga through to Mildura. It was really detrimental to their fortnight of riding.

So there are many authorities involved in the forest: the catchment management authority, with the environmental watering; the shire, with recreation and all those other activities; Parks Victoria, with the management of the visitors, roads and park conservation, have a huge role to play; DELWP, with the management of the forests and roads; and Murray river tourism, with the promotion of media, both hard copy and social maps. They are all important, all those up there. Then of course there is RDV, with the funding for infrastructure, and we really do need some infrastructure out there so that the tourists can utilise it. Small business get an advantage out of tourism, but also they need to look after the travelling public. There is GMW, of course, with the water management of the water that goes into the forests and all the environmental water. Then we have Yorta Yorta and Barapa Barapa, with the cultural heritage, and we need them involved — strongly involved. We also need coordination between all those agencies and council, and we need the culture to somehow change so that they all work together to get the best for the environment but also the best for social and economic output.

We need protection and interpretation — so signage for cultural heritage and environmental features — we need to promote the watering of the forest with interpretive boards, CDs and apps and we need education. In particular Kate Bennetts and the other flood plain ecologists have got great photos and information that we need to put in a book so that people, when they come up and have a look, can understand what is out in the forest.

We need to manage our visitors. We need to provide ways for people to engage with the bush and the water in a low-impact and a safe way. We need to provide ways for people to engage, and they include boardwalks to give access to Reedy Lagoon and Black Swamp. If we can put those boardwalks in, people can get out onto the swamps and have a look at the bird life and really enjoy nature as it is without impacting on it. Also close to Cohuna near the caravan park, a viewing platform over the town swamp would be an excellent addition there, allowing tourists to just relax and watch the birds go about their activities.

We need good walking and bike trails from Koondrook to Cohuna through the forest and also along to Torrumbarry and to the important sites out there. There are plenty of important sites out there that are worth looking at, and we need good walking and bike trails to get there. Also along the river most of the way it is okay when it is dry but there are a couple of patches that really do need to be tidied up. If you had good access along the river, that would allow people then to camp at any time of the year and enjoy the environment. Also ideally we would need one accessible track from Cohuna out to the river. At the moment it is very difficult to do that.

As I was saying, the visitors need to be managed. Weeds and rubbish are also an ongoing issue. The take in, take out policy just does not work in the Gunbower forest, because people camp on the Murray for extended periods. Who wants rubbish in their boot to take back to Melbourne when it has been sitting in a bag for a fortnight? Shires and Parks Victoria have to pick up the cost, and it is \$70 000 alone for Gannawarra shire to manage that rubbish. That is just simply what the shire pays. The community itself has to pick up a fair bit. Some have to lock their bins over the Easter period because otherwise they just get filled with campers' rubbish. We also need funding to enforce laws against illegal activities and to repair the roads after flooding occurs so that people can get out and enjoy the forest and the benefits of that environmental water.

In summary, the watering of the forest has huge benefits not only environmentally but also economically and socially. To capture the social, tourism and economic potential we need to invest in the necessary management of and infrastructure in our parks. To do that we need to work closely together to achieve that for all locals,

Victorians, Australians and overseas visitors. We have many overseas visitors who go through our gateway centre in Cohuna, and they are keen to get out in the forest and have a look around. We do need to remember that the environmental watering comes at a cost to the consumptive pool, the local economy and GDP. Thank you for taking the time to come to our area.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Neville, for that very comprehensive presentation. I just wanted to touch on a couple of items that you raise, a couple of dot points there that you had, that were also referenced in the submission. We have heard this afternoon sort of the complex balance, if you like, between the environment, farmers, tourists, fishers and other water users. Yesterday we had the opportunity to be out at Gunbower and Reedy Creek. We talked to the CMA about habitat creation and the relatively sensitive nature in terms of when the environmental water was put into the pool, the response from the environment in terms of species creation and the sensitivity around timing — in many respects it is weeks rather than months that make the difference between a bird species perhaps being able to be there or not. Can you elaborate on your thoughts around how we get the model right in terms of that balance? And how do we regularly check that the model is actually working between what farmers need and what the forest needs?

Mr GOULDING — It is a very difficult question. Do I put my farmers hat on or do I put my community hat on? Basically I am happy with where we are at the moment. My personal water usage is now half of what it used to be, but the environment definitely needed it so that is fine. My concern is the 450 gigalitres of up-water. If that is taken out of the consumptive pool, then my dairy farm will not survive, let alone all the other dairy farms. There will not be enough water for the permanent plantings in the drought years, so that is a major concern. If they had spent millions of dollars on planting crops or planting trees, they will not survive during the next drought if the 450 gigalitres comes out.

If I go one step further and be controversial, the \$3.75 billion of GDP that is evaporated out of the lower lakes in South Australia is twice the amount of water that Torrumbarry irrigation district uses, so that is a major concern to us. I believe that we are putting that down there but just evaporating it and getting no economic output. There is not really any environmental outcome as well. I will allow Melanie to have a go at that question.

Ms TRANTER — Probably the only thing I would add is that environmental water management is fairly new, so finding that balance around the timing of when you deliver it and the response that you get really takes time to see. I guess viewing it as a relatively new field, learning by doing is going to happen. I think it will get better over time — knowing where those windows of opportunities are, how much flexibility you have got around timing to create that habitat and the response you are going to get. I guess it is also understanding that you cannot just do it a couple of times and then you know the answer, because what is going to happen depends on so many different environmental cues. You cannot just put water out, the birds do not come, and then say, ‘Well, we did it at the wrong time’. You need to do it for a few years to really start to find out what those answers are.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Just very quickly, it is fair to say in your assessment that this does not have to be an either/or. They do not have to be mutually exclusive. You can be working with farmers, irrigators and environmental water all at the same time, but it is a matter of this evolving as we get better at understanding and as technology improves as well. Is that a fair assessment?

Ms TRANTER — Yes, I think so.

Mr GOULDING — Yes, I would agree. It is learning experience, and the environment is learning as we go. The amount of fish that are breeding now is just astronomical, but we need the infrastructure to make sure that we get the best use out of that. The other one was the ability to react when it rains and that sort of stuff. Last year, or in the last flood, I thought we had an opportunity to put water in Johnson and Hird, which Daniel will know a fair bit about. That can go in there for three months and then be allowed to go down to Pyramid Creek. It will have lots of food for the fish down at Pyramid Creek. So there is an opportunity if we use the floodwaters smartly. They wanted to dry those two wetlands out, but let us put it in there for three months if there is extra water because the environment does not allow you to make decisions. You are going to need plenty of water. There is an opportunity to put it in there but then drop it out. That water would have been really beneficial for fish down in Pyramid Creek, but it also could have been used for irrigation later on as well.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you for your presentation. I too was wondering what hat you are wearing here this afternoon, because your presentation and your responses seem to take a reasonably good balance between the

environmental needs and the irrigation needs of this collective pool of water. I have been involved with national water plans, the Murray-Darling Basin plans and the north-south pipelines. I have seen it and done it all in relation to the competing interests of the community, environmental and irrigation needs.

We had a very enjoyable afternoon with the CMA yesterday looking at what they are doing with Gunbower forest management, particularly in relation to both land and water. They have invested considerably — or the government has — through the CMA into these sort of holding gates that allow fish to swim upstream, so they have some control of water flow and water levels around the forest. It was explained to me in relation to the use of a blackwater event that some flooding is provided to create these lagoons. We saw Reedy lagoon yesterday, which looked fantastic, full of water and potentially a great habitat for fish — and carp unfortunately. They have got some cages there doing some carp capture work. They also used the environmental water to flush some of that heavy organic material and water that was being held that created some problems for the fish as well as using the blackwater.

From that practice point of view, is the CMA using good practice in relation to the use of environmental water to protect the forest but not waste that environmental water that could potentially be used for, as you have indicated, irrigation or some other wealth generation? I am just not clear. You talk about a plethora of agencies, and we all know that, but are they actually all doing good jobs? Because they have an entitlement to use environmental water from the environmental holder. So as much as everyone would love to share that water around, the fact is that it is tagged for environmental use. I need to understand: do you think the current agencies — the CMA that we worked with yesterday — are using that water to good use in the preservation of these lakes, lagoons and forests?

Mr GOULDING — The water that is used is used during the cooler months so that the advent of bad blackwater — rather than just blackwater, so in other words the deoxygenated water — is minimised. Also by using it at the right times they have got opportunities for dilution flows back into the Murray. By putting it through the forest it does an excellent job in the forest, but once it comes out of the forest it can then be re-used again and again down the river either for irrigation or other environmental work down there. So the opportunity to utilise the water in the forest and gain the fish breeding, and the bird breeding in particular, and then drop it back into the Murray and use it downstream as well has huge benefits, I think. The opportunity for multiple uses of that water really does need to be taken into consideration and accepted.

Mr RAMSAY — So you are happy with the CMA and its use of the environmental water in and around the forest?

Mr GOULDING — As a dairy farmer, probably not, but as a community person, yes. It is creating real opportunities for fish breeding. You only have to go out, as you did yesterday, where it has been flooded and where it has not been flooded. The health of the trees and the environment itself is just outstanding in terms of the benefits out of the environmental water.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Thank you very much for coming in today. I have got one question. It is not a simple question to answer, but I will put it to you anyway.

Mr GOULDING — You are asking a dairy farmer?

Mr O'SULLIVAN — We all understand that with irrigation water there is a whole range of charges and fees and regulations and rules and so forth that are applied. Have we got a level playing field in terms of the same fees and charges and regulations and so forth being applied to environmental water?

Mr GOULDING — I will not necessarily answer your question, but I will in one way. The charges are not really clear out there, but the fact of the matter is that when I want to water tomorrow, and when it is 40 degrees I want to be able to water, if environment pays the same fees and has the same rights et cetera as I do, then they can have the water as well as I can and so I am going to probably miss out once or twice, and that really has a huge detriment on my economics. The way it is at the moment, irrigation has the use of the water when they want to use it and environment fits in with that. A key message from CMA at the moment is: yes, we want the environmental water, but we will use it when it does not impact on productivity out of the consumptive pool. It is terribly important. I do not have an issue with the costs at the moment, providing I can get my water when I want it, and the environment looks after us in that respect.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks very much for coming in. You have touched on a couple of interesting concepts in your presentation. One that I wanted to pick up was tourism. If we are going to do environmental watering and have specific environmental water projects, how much of a focus should be put on getting the secondary benefits of tourism? We have had examples in this very region where an ecologist has reported that an environmental watering of a particular land in spring will give you the same environmental outcomes as it would in autumn except with one of them you can have hunting as well, and that is going to bring a couple of hundred duck hunters to the region to spend all their money. So how much focus should be put on those secondary outcomes?

Mr GOULDING — Let us be specific. Hird Swamp is a prime example of what you have raised. The watering of that was held back last year or the year before, and basically instead of putting it in when they would have got a good growth rate in there they held it back until it was colder, but also after the duck-shooting opening, so not only did it have detrimental impact, I believe, on the environmental benefits they would have got but also it had a huge impact socially and economically for the region. Hird and Johnson swamps are both prime duck-shooting areas, but also socially they are excellent areas as well. Yes, we lost out there, purely because, in your opinion and in a few other people's opinion, they held the water out until after duck opening. I also did not think it was as good for the environment.

Ms TRANTER — I would probably just add to that that floods come at all times of the year. They do not always come in autumn; they do come in spring. I think that one of the things about environmental water is that it should be variable in the same way that flows come in a variable way. It is really good to try and maximise the social and recreational outcomes, but it is environmental water and we should keep in mind that maybe a spring flow or a spring flood is better. Again, this is learning over time. The monitoring needs to happen so you can make an informed decision and say, 'Yes, we can put water out in autumn and we don't compromise the environmental outcome', or understand that if you are compromising some outcome by putting the water out in autumn, then you are willing to accept that outcome for the other good that might come from that water — that it is not too big.

Mr RIORDAN — Part of this inquiry is dealing with the governance of the environmental water. I am getting a flavour from the community representations that some of the social and economic benefits are coming in quite often a poor third in some of the decisions around the ways environmental water is dealt with. I just wonder: what is your experience of the mechanisms that currently exist within the broader community for local people to bring their local knowledge, anecdotal experiences and understandings? Often those writing these reports or the people that are in charge or managing are new to the area and they perhaps have not spent a lot of time there — heaven forbid, they might be from the city and not really understand life in the country, or whatever the reason might be. Do you feel there are enough opportunities for local people to be listened to and to feel like they are participating in some of the decisions that are going on in relation to their knowledge?

Mr GOULDING — I think the community would suggest not. I am involved in the community reference group for the Gunbower forest, so I have an opportunity to have input into the CMA, but others who are not on that group can chat with me. Generally, the average person — excuse the expression — does not have that opportunity to talk to the CMA. It is quite difficult at times to have a forum where people can have that say, but by the same token, it would be good to have that input.

I think generally, where the CMA gets the opportunity, they do have a listen, but in particular I think with my presentation the add-ons and the social and economic benefits really are not gained enough by the infrastructure and the dollars put in to further infrastructure to allow the locals to get the benefit that they would like. In particular when you flood the forest the roads are inaccessible, so those that want to go fishing out on the Murray just cannot get there unless they go to Echuca or to Torrumbarry or to Koondrook, so they have to go the long way around.

So I think it is important that the dollars are spent around improving the local or the environmental opportunities for people to enjoy the environment when we are using that environmental water.

Ms TRANTER — I would just add that I think that a lot has been invested in the environmental water, and I think the government does have a bit of a responsibility to invest in those other things that can start to give back to the community, where there may be some perception of a lot of negatives around environmental water. I think some of that perhaps could be turned a little — the idea that environmental water would —

Mr RIORDAN — Targeted spending.

Ms TRANTER — bring tourism to this area. In the same way as with the birds and stuff, you cannot just put water out and everything is going to happen. You need to actually create some infrastructure for those people to use, because not everyone is used to being in the bush, and it can be a bit scary driving out into Gunbower forest if you are not used to that sort of thing — but if you have a map, if you have some directed activities. I guess Neville today has presented Gunbower as a sort of case study, but this applies on a broader scale — you put the water out there and you give people a way to engage with that water in a way that they do not wreck the environment or hurt themselves; I think there is a real obligation to follow up with that additional stuff.

The CHAIR — Neville and Melanie, thank you very much for representing the community and for answering our questions and for your time today.

Mr GOULDING — Thank you so much. Thanks again for coming to our area.

Witnesses withdrew.