

***Submission on behalf of the Uniting Church to the House Standing  
Committee on Regional Australia***

***Follow up submission after congregational consultation***



***Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in  
Regional Australia***

*This submission will deal particularly with the social justice and welfare aspects of the plan because these areas are our special emphasis and we believe these aspects cannot be divorced from our understanding that we live in God's created world and we have a responsibility to care for this.*

**Authors from Board of Mission, Synod of NSW/ACT, Uniting Church in Australia**

**Ross Neville**  
Rural Consultant  
Ph 0263669698  
PO Box 70  
Orange 2800  
[ross.neville3@bigpond.com](mailto:ross.neville3@bigpond.com)

**Julie Greig**  
Rural Chaplain  
02 69671395  
4 Gratton St  
Hillston 2675  
[julieg@nsw.uca.org.au](mailto:julieg@nsw.uca.org.au)

**Rev. Kel Hodge**  
Rural Chaplain  
0263442920  
37 Blatchford St  
Canowindra 2804  
[kelhodge@bigpond.net.au](mailto:kelhodge@bigpond.net.au)

## **Subsequent Responses to the Uniting Church submission to the House Standing Committee on Regional Australia**

The original submission to the Government was completed without a great deal of consultation with the basin congregations and UCA people in NSW.

A survey paper asking for comments was made to 140 congregations and groups within the church as well as the 4 Presbyteries of our church within the basin. Comment was also invited from any congregation across NSW who were passionate about the issues.

The responses came from: Yass; Barellan; Finley; Northern Inland –Inverell; Forbes; Jerilderie; Cowra; Henty Culcairn; Colleambolly; Hunter Presbytery; Gunnedah; Peel Valley; Kippax (Approx 90 persons in total were involved in group discussions)  
Information has also been added from the meeting at Dubbo of the Shires Assoc under a Murray Darling Alliance meeting of 150 persons because this meeting represented community people.

The responses are compiled together under similar themed responses and have lead to our five recommendations.

The Uniting church Christian faith perspective means that we give equal weighting to:

- The environment (God's revelation of himself and charge to us to care for creation)
- Food production. (Care for your neighbours)
- Community and social care and responsibility for just distribution of income and services.(social justice issues)

We understand Farmers naturally have to look to the longer term future and the next generation not just the short term. If they don't do this they will go out of business. We understand they are actually listening to the land and creation because the Christian ethic indicates that this is how God reveals himself and his nature.

We also understand 'that there is always a creative tension between producing food and the environment' (David Evans Washington USAID).

The role of Government we understand is to mediate and establish boundaries to achieve this balance and also look toward the longer time frame.

The Uniting Church is a church that practices this role. The church has been dealing with diversity of opinion and theology and the process of consensus gathering since its formation.

## Summary

### **Recommendation 1**

**Change needs to be with real consultation and include local wisdom.**

Community consultation should occur to determine all Sustainable Diversion Levels. It is not possible to divorce communities from water use in the basin.

### **Recommendation 2**

**There needs to be a consensual process to help communities find new ways of being.**

Change needs consensus and consultation if it is to produce the most effective outcomes. Community assistance will be needed for consultation for planning and building new future possibilities. The plan must incorporate viable opportunities for communities to exist in new ways, using local knowledge of strengths specific to their own areas.

### **Recommendation 3**

**There has to be long term certainty for those using the water including irrigators and communities.**

The levels of uncertainty must be urgently addressed because of the level of injustice that is occurring across the basin.

### **Recommendation 4**

**The whole Australian community, and not just those living in the basin area, needs to share “the pain” of fixing the problem.**

The response to the water reform needed in the basin needs to be an Australia wide reform. Education on water use and its link with food production is needed across Australia.

### **Recommendation 5**

**Australia needs a long term food policy**

The government also needs to establish a long term food sovereignty policy.

## **Recommendation 1**

### **Change needs to be with real consultation and include local wisdom.**

To enable such consultations the government could establish independent Basin community support workers who will work with each basin river system. The UCA has been doing aspects of this consultation work successfully for 6 years with just 2 Rural Chaplains in a limited number of towns in NSW.

The design of dams as part of our river systems and the then deemed availability of water for food production precipitated the expansion of irrigated food production. A priced product that provided a good return on infrastructure cost development accelerated the production of a good cheap controlled quality food that Australians depend upon. Communities grew to provide support industries to these irrigation industries. As numbers of irrigators increased then the population grew and the service industries followed and regional communities began to be established.

Because this is the history of the water use the government needs to work with communities and irrigators together because they are so interrelated. All towns are located near where there was understood to be a reliable water source. These towns and cities need to be educated about water options. Some towns have programs that are demonstrating massive savings of water using strategies such as storm water recycling. Urban areas need to address the unsustainability of their town and city development with its current water use practices. If this is not done it is perceived as a double standard and a party political decision by smaller basin communities.

Many basin communities have already seen their local services gradually being withdrawn by corporations and governments and the community anger at being targeted will be significant.

Excessive development has been allowed to happen in some areas because there is little understanding of the long term variability of water supply and how it should be planned. For example in many areas tourism development has not allowed for dry periods.

Consultation with the communities will allow some communities to recognize and identify the inappropriateness of some of their development. These communities should then be encouraged and supported to and remove themselves from the water system and examine alternatives.

The land, environment, food production and humankind are intertwined with community. Enviro-Food production and community together are self supporting systems. It will be morally wrong to value one more significantly in economic terms than any other

The Smallest communities will suffer the most in any sudden or quickly reduced water allocations. This has already been documented in places such as Warren which lost 1600 persons because of the recent drought.

A survey in Wee Waa in 2007 indicated that reduced access to surface and groundwater was the biggest contributor to a loss of 60% of permanent staff and a loss of 40% of casual staff in the town. Two thirds of these people left the region. The main staff loss were professionals.

## **Recommendation 2**

**There needs to be a consensual process to help communities find new ways of being.**

The sense of powerlessness has been exacerbated by what has been happening over the last couple of decades. The way the plan for water returning to the environment is being implemented is perceived as an attack on community livelihood. Communities feel that their opinions don't really count and they are powerless.

Rural communities are undergoing readjustment in a multiple of areas already, water use and its allocation is only one of the issues. Population thresholds, mining, regionalization of businesses and services, drought, changes in farming practices have been reducing the number of farms to support a community are just some of these issues.

Professor Margaret Alston highlights the fact that the Murray Darling Basin plan is actually acting as a catalyst to a longer term build up of smoldering issues and anger about the pressures for change in basin communities.

Many communities have been exploring ways to diversify from their agricultural service dependency, understanding it is a survival need. The UCA rural chaplains have been working with a number of communities to gather all the stakeholders in an area to discuss and plan for their future. They have worked in places such as Young after the loss of their abattoir and then the cherry harvest in 2010 and Louth after the government purchase of water from Toorale station and the subsequent social impact on Louth.

It has been already been proven that it is possible to get good outcomes for both water users and the environment if consultation and time are allowed. The Macquarie Castlereagh Water Sharing Plan was developed over 4 years and reached a consensus to allow sustainable water for the Macquarie marshes and other water users. Such consultation proves that good processes can provide a win win for the environment and water users but it does take time. Local wisdom and understanding are needed to contribute to a good outcome.

Because this water reduction impact appears to be greatest in the areas with the smallest communities, the time frame for change should be considerably extended. These small communities will definitely need up to five years to plan for an alternative future. The changes must be owned by each community with a considerable degree of consultation.

Communities and Basin areas will need government assistance to allow them to develop a local vision for a future with less water in a climate of increasing climate variability and less family farmers. They are already at a low capacity with both human social and financial

capital. In general most rural services are poor and far fewer services than other members of our society.

Community assistance will be needed for consultation, for planning and for building new future possibilities. Lots of organisations such as Zero Carbon Australia for example suggests a number of projects that rural communities could look to, to provide new employment opportunities and industries.

### **Recommendation 3**

#### **There has to be long term certainty for those using the water including irrigators and communities**

The uncertainty over water and water buy back as it has been implemented is unjust. There is no complementary community compensation for Shires and businesses. Land values, house values, business values, rates are frozen or falling while there is uncertainty. Water buy backs are seen as ad hoc only compensating the irrigator and not the community who supply the supporting industries or services. Water should be tied to the land and community or river basin and all parties should be compensated or consulted to develop a final outcome. The banks use a ratio of 1 to 5 for a multiplier of investment in rural irrigation water and they are indicating prices are frozen or falling in Basin areas.

The uncertainty of price passes through to shire rates, sale of land, houses and businesses in a community. Of the 69 local government areas in the NSW part of the Basin 62% of these LGA's (43) already have populations of less than 10,000 and, most struggle with viability problems (Socio Economic Context MDBP Technical report BP02). The planned reduction of SDL's will mean a declining population and rate paying base which will exacerbate the struggles of these shires.

The degree of uncertainty about a lack of consensus between States and the worry about the interpretation of the Water Act with the possibility of legal challenges will continue to disadvantage basin communities and irrigators.

## **Recommendation 4**

**The whole Australian community, and not just those living in the basin area, needs to share “the pain” of fixing the problem.**

Excess water allocation must be understood to be a societal issue not just an irrigator’s issue. Society has demanded diverse, cheap, quality food with no understanding of the cost or of production to the grower or the environment.

Rice and Cotton originally were opportunity crops when excess water was in the system. Yet Australian farmers in growing these crops are setting a world standard in water use efficiency per kg. of product. They are improving their production of these crops with reduced volume of water use. The appropriateness of some of the land being used for irrigation is an indication of the irresponsibility of some past practices. This is not the fault of the farmer but of the society. The economic price for water must not be allowed to exceed the viable cost for food production

The people in the Basin region who have been identified as proportionately the oldest, with the lowest education levels post school and one of the lowest dependency ratios. Also in the remote regions of the Basin the indigenous population has increased by 13.7% over a 10 year period while the non indigenous population has declined by 13.3%. Towns with more than 20% indigenous populations include Moree, Wellington, Condobolin, Lightning Ridge, Coonamble and Bourke (MDBP BP02) These people will become unintended “victims” of the impact of the plan.

Why do the impacts of the necessary adjustments of SDL’s have to fall on the current generation of farmers and irrigators, industries and communities who are significantly already understood to be the most disadvantaged group within Australia?

The positive role farmer’s play in care of the environment must be explained more widely and extensively. Farmers generally have demonstrated they are able to use land, maximize production and maintain long term sustainability. They care for the environment. They are pro environment as demonstrated by the level of participation in: tree planting, the setting aside of natural habitat areas, contouring and laser leveling, fencing of creeks and water ways, reuse of irrigation water, lowering of salinity levels and raised water tables, reducing the amount of water to produce crops.

Farmers instinctively change practices to become more sustainable and take care of plant and animal species. Most farmers are using best practice and upgrading at their own expense but this would increase significantly with incentives.

Many growers in the Murrumbidgee area would like other options for water savings to be considered. One option is for a grower is to sell some of their water entitlements. This then enables them to have the capital to upgrade their systems by: Installing drip irrigation instead of flood irrigation or Installing spray irrigation to replace furrow irrigation or cementing water channels. Terry McFarlane from Griffith funded his upgrading by selling 500ml to the Government Water for Rivers to achieve this style of water saving.

Multi functional farming with a diversity of the uses of the land and water are going to be needed for the future. Many see the future of farming to be large bulk food producing properties and small family farms as being less able to financially adopt new technologies who will need government support to do the degree of infrastructural development needed. The loss of the smaller family farms and subsequent population loss has big implications for communities.

Infrastructure support can improve water use and savings as much as reducing irrigation volumes. The ways of moving water can be much improved and this doesn't appear to have been considered in the plan to restore water to environmentally sensitive areas.

Government should financially support water efficiency and infrastructure savings programs if they wish to accelerate the process.

## **Recommendation 5**

**The government needs to set the boundaries and parameters for community and Basin discussions with a timeline for a plan or a vision for their own future. This future will be based on a future with less water and a resilience plan to deal with climate variability and change.**

**The environmental areas, the nature of food production levels needed, the possible water limitations and considerations for each River catchment area should be given.**

Profitable returns, food production, sustainable living patterns, security of tenure can be achieved within a healthy Australian style river system if people are empowered and given the opportunity to contribute toward the outcome.

Australian society need to understand the role Australian farmers play in the world food supply system. We understand the United Nations is indicating food production will have to increase by 70% to meet the world population levels expected within 40 years.

Education is critically needed by all of Australians. Urban, rural communities and irrigators all need education about water saving and use. We cannot allow water sports and tourism to become of equal value to the environment and food production. Without the environment and food the others won't exist.

The contribution of urban sprawl using intensively farmed areas and forcing farming and food production to occur in less productive areas needs to be understood. This transition is usually to more environmentally vulnerable, climactically variable and sensitive land areas of Australia.

The covert policy that water goes to those who can afford it will mean that the cost of production of food will be more than the retail price of the food produced. House holders pay

\$1.93KL for processed and treated water. Farmers cannot afford to pay the same amount for untreated water to irrigate. But currently water is being taken from irrigation and sold to urban dwellers because they pay more. This can be seen in Victoria with farmers selling their water allocations to Melbourne. Australia needs to decide if this is the most appropriate way to allocate water.

## Appendix

### The following were identified by respondents as flaws in the guide

- It is too biased toward the environment.
- Many of the environmental figures used are theoretical with little research support them.
- There has not been enough discussion with the major stake holders
- There has not been enough consultation with older river people who can tell how before irrigation the river and ecosystems survived even when the river did stop flowing. For example in 1915 both the Murray and Darling rivers dried up and yet the ecosystems have adapted, flourished and coped.
- The strategy proposed is government legislating for a result. Historically we can see this is flawed.
- Other more serious and less extensive issues are not being addressed. Commercial mining interests overriding damage to the environment, food production and water systems in the Hunter Valley.
- There is a danger that any plan developed can still be challenged in the courts because of alternate understanding of the Water Act 1997