

NEWS

Water buybacks targeted

Committee responds to wave of anger.



CHANGING COURSE: Report calls for new approach to Basin plan

Farming communities along the Murray and Darling rivers have welcomed a bipartisan report that has called for an end to non-strategic water buybacks and criticised the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's proposed cuts to farm water allocations.

The House of Representatives Regional Australia Committee inquiry was set up in the wake of widespread anger across Basin communities which feared the consequences for their farms, businesses and towns if the authority pressed ahead with plans to reduce water allocations.

Chaired by independent MP Tony Windsor (New England, NSW), the committee set out to balance the economic needs of farming communities along the Murray-Darling with the environmental needs of a river system long ravaged by over-allocation and a decade of drought.

During public hearings across the Basin, many irrigators, town mayors and business people rallied to tell MPs that these river communities faced annihilation if farmers' water entitlements were cut by thousands of gigalitres so as to return more water to the river's environmental flow.

Releasing the committee's report, *Of drought and flooding rains*, Mr Windsor said the health of the river system can be maintained by making significant water savings without the significant cut in allocations to irrigators.

"We believe our committee report does find a way in what we call a win-win solution," Mr Windsor said.

"Similar outcomes can be achieved through working with the community, working with government investment in terms of on-farm efficiencies and environmental water efficiencies, evaporative savings – a whole range of proposals."

The report recommended all non-strategic water buybacks be put on hold. It called for no mining projects to be approved in the Basin if they have an adverse impact on water resources. The committee also recommended the establishment of a national water fund to finance various water-saving projects as a joint venture between federal, state and territory governments.

The committee was scathing of the Basin Authority's consultation process before and after it released its guide to the proposed Basin Plan in late 2010, in which it proposed water cutbacks of between 3,000 and 4,000 gigalitres to ensure a more sustainable river system. The committee's report called on the authority to develop a proper community engagement strategy.

"It was very obvious the authority hadn't done a good job in terms of discussing the issues with the community," Mr Windsor said.

"To have the fairly brutal cuts to entitlement as a way to solve the obvious issues within the river system – the way in which that was marketed wasn't the correct way to go."

The committee's call for all non-strategic water buybacks to be put on hold was welcomed by all farming communities along the river system.

Victorian Farmers Federation president Andrew Broad said Victorian irrigators were also calling on the federal government to halt water buybacks until their full impact upon rural communities is assessed.

"It is disappointing that it has taken the release of this report to finally highlight the concerns of irrigators which have been so long ignored," he said. "We now expect the government to adopt the report's recommendations regarding a more strategic approach to buybacks."

Upstream the Queensland Farmers' Federation also supported the report's findings, especially the call to establish a water fund for water recovery programs. The QFF welcomed this fund's manager being responsible for strategic and localised approaches to buybacks as well as infrastructure programs.

According to the QFF, this approach should deliver "more accountable water recovery programs but we will wait to see if it will take a more responsive and cost efficient approach to water

recovery or simply result in another level of costly bureaucracy”.

“Irrigators will welcome quick action on the recommendation to cease all non-strategic water purchases by prioritising buybacks to achieve the lowest possible impact on communities.”

While the Australian Conservation Foundation welcomed the report, the environmentalist group was against the committee’s calls for voluntary water buybacks to be re-assessed.

ACF’s healthy rivers campaigner Arlene Harriss-Buchan said the inquiry has importantly reaffirmed bipartisan commitment to water reform and the implementation of a good Basin Plan.

“But we are very concerned by the suggestion that the successful and effective program of voluntary water buybacks should be suspended,” Dr Harriss-Buchan said.

“Voluntary buybacks return real water to the environment and provide real benefits for taxpayers’ investment. The efficiency and effectiveness of the voluntary buyback program has been acknowledged by the National Audit Office.”

Dr Harriss-Buchan said healthy communities depend on healthy rivers and for rivers to return to health the environment needs more water.

“But, as Environment Minister Tony Burke has said, delay is the enemy of water reform,” she said. “We must not put the brakes on the important voluntary buyback scheme.”

“ACF urges the government to reject any moves to slow down or stop the successful and effective program of voluntary buybacks of water entitlements.”

Water and Environment Minister Tony Burke, Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig and Regional Australia Minister Simon Crean all welcomed the committee’s recommendations in a joint response.

“We welcome this report as part of a process of building community and parliamentary support for reforms to deliver a healthy river system, economic capacity and sustainable communities in the Murray Darling Basin,” it states.

“The Murray Darling Basin Authority has committed to considering the findings and recommendations of the Standing Committee’s inquiry before releasing its Draft Basin Plan.

“The Gillard government wants Murray Darling Basin reform to deliver three outcomes: healthy working rivers, strong communities and sustainable food production.

“This report is important for the more than two million people who live in the Basin including farm communities that are committed to be efficient and sustainable contributors to Australia’s economy.”

According to the ministers, the government remains committed to delivering a final plan for the Murray Darling Basin to the federal parliament in early 2012. •

LINKS

www.aph.gov.au/ra
ra.reps@aph.gov.au
 (02) 6277 4162

Treaties scrutiny sidelined

Treaties Committee Chair Kelvin Thomson (Wills, Vic) has voiced his frustration over the lack of public scrutiny of some international agreements.

Mr Thomson told the House of Representatives the committee’s role in giving advice on international agreements is sometimes bypassed because amendments come into force before they are presented to parliament, even though the amendments are provided to signatory countries up to 12 months before they take effect.

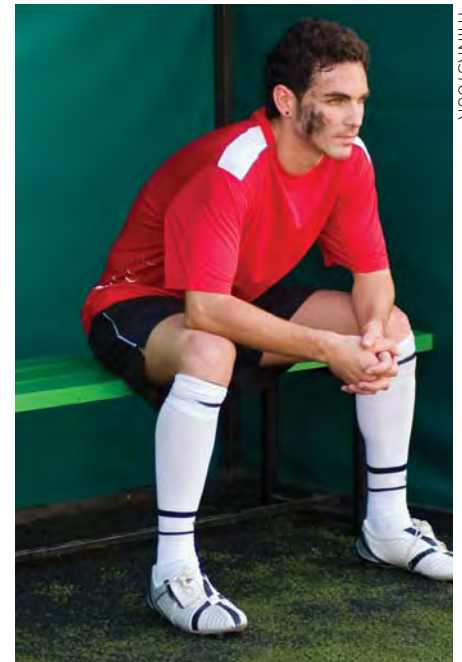
“The Treaties Committee plays an important role in the treaty making process by allowing parliamentarians and the public to have their say about treaties Australia is proposing to ratify,” Mr Thomson said.

“Regrettably some treaties come into force for Australia without the benefit of parliamentary or public scrutiny.”

Arecentexamplewastheamendments to the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, which were provided to the Australian government in mid-2009 but were not tabled in parliament until November 2010, five months after the period for objections ended.

According to the Treaties Committee, parliament should have the opportunity before amendments take effect to examine the changes and advise the government to ‘opt out’ or attempt to have the amendments removed.

“There is enough time in this 12 month period for parliament and the public to make a material contribution to the outcome,” Mr Thomson said.



THINKSTOCK

BENCHED: Committee left out of the game on treaty amendments

In a subsequent hearing on other shipping-related treaty amendments, the Department of Infrastructure and Transport acknowledged the committee’s concerns.

“That recommendation is being acted on,” Ms Poh Aye Tan from the department’s maritime policy branch told the committee. “And I would like to assure the committee that all efforts will be made to ensure that future amendments...will be tabled in time to allow the committee to express a meaningful view.” •

LINKS

www.aph.gov.au/jsct
jsct@aph.gov.au
 (02) 6277 4002