



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Murray-Darling Basin

SPEECH

Tuesday, 7 February 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Tuesday, 7 February 2012 Page 141 Questioner Speaker McKenzie, Sen Bridget</p>	<p>Source Senate Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Senator McKENZIE (Victoria) (20:23): The Murray-Darling Basin draft plan consultation period ends in 68 days. This iteration of the proposed plan was released on 28 November 2011, with a 20-week consultation period set for submissions to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. The next public meeting in Victoria will be in Mildura this coming Friday, 10 February, followed by a meeting in Swan Hill on 22 February. Sadly, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority has not scheduled a forum in Bendigo, the largest population centre in Northern Victoria. In fact Victorians, as a whole, thus far have had only one meeting—one community consultation, and that was in Shepparton last year—despite over one-third of the consultation period having gone. So what a relief, particularly to Northern Victorians, that another two meetings have finally been scheduled.

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority is planning to take 2,750 billion litres of water from Victorian irrigators and about 15,000 jobs from Victorian regional communities. Northern Victoria produces more than one-third of Australia's food. The Goulburn Valley alone provides nearly 20 per cent of Victoria's agricultural production, and 80 per cent of this production is only possible as a result of irrigation. The region is seeing signs of recovery for the first time in many years after a sustained period of drought punctuated by floods. These communities are concerned that their recovery will be threatened by a federal government that does not understand how we live and work in regional Australia.

While January is often an opportunity for some down time—and I must admit I did take advantage of a terrible camping trip full of rain and wind down on the coast—I used the summer break also to visit many of the large towns that will be affected by the Murray-Darling Basin draft plan, starting in Mildura up in the north-west of my state and going right along the Murray and ending up in Wodonga. During this time I had the opportunity to hear firsthand the views of industry, community leaders, food producers, businesspeople, students and our local mayors. These were not stage-managed events where communities say the same things they have been saying to bureaucrats for years, but honest and open dialogues where they did lots of talking and I did lots of listening. We went to 14 towns in about 14 days. In between Mildura and Wodonga, there were iconic centres

such as Swan Hill, Wycheproof, Charlton, Serpentine, Echuca, Cobram, Strathmerton, Wangaratta, Horsham, Beechworth, Wodonga, Milawa, Yarrawonga and the place where I spent some time growing up, Benalla.

The message was consistent right across the community: the Murray-Darling Basin draft plan was causing social and economic damage throughout Northern Victoria and leaving the remaining producers with heavy financial burdens. Many spoke of the need for investment in on-farm and community infrastructure and the measures needed to secure communities. They asked for improved certainty to support broader investment and there was much concern about the devaluation of assets—in particular land—and the possibility of reduced investor confidence, particularly in Central and Northern Victoria. And we have seen this just last week with the reports in the *Age* and the drop in house prices in regional Victoria.

There were various concerns about the current approach to water buyback and past approaches and their impacts. While many recognised that water is required for the environment—we all agree on that—the issue is about how much is required and how social and economic impacts are taken into account. Community members recognise the need for environmental flows—we all want a healthy river—but not at the expense of water that is needed for dairy farming, for fruit production and for the region's large food-processing industry. Irrigators were telling me that water should be secured from efficiency gains and that water for the environment should be treated in the same way as water for irrigation through water licence applications, and not as a separate category.

In towns like Stanhope and Tongala, I heard requests for water certainty so that these communities could grow and prosper, a certainty not provided by the draft basin plan, which fails to clearly explain how economic and social factors have been incorporated into its targets. There was major concern on how the government would provide the socioeconomic support. Those communities through a variety of ways have told me that they want the government to consider what constitutes fair compensation. These are iconic food-producing areas that have been built on the back of irrigated agriculture, where water is wealth. Now they are vulnerable communities facing an uncertain future.

As a senator for Victoria, I am urging local industry to put forward submissions to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's proposed plan. This plan has to be about the people in Victoria and the communities, but that can only happen if they make their voices heard. I encourage regional Victorians to continue to explain their views to the water minister, Tony Burke, and, while it remains to be seen whether any changes to the draft plan will be made, it is up to our communities to be on the front foot and to put our views forward and engage in the process. No-one understands the importance of a sustainable river and the systems and environment more than the people living in it and with it. I encourage communities to emphasise the potential impact with their own stories and their own needs and their own data. A strong local voice needs to be included in any submission put forward. Last year it was the people and the strong opinions voiced right throughout the basin that made all the difference, and any drop-off in that intensity will give the impression that this latest plan has local approval. As we sit in parliaments we need to hear the views of real people and the real businesses. In each submission we need to see input not only from the farming sector but also from other industries, retail providers and the wider community. Time and again Labor and the Greens have shown that they do not understand the issues and are not serious about listening to the Murray-Darling Basin communities and their concerns. The scheduling of these community consultation meetings during harvest time particularly shows that for our horticulturalists.

Our irrigators have just come through 10 years of drought, and the minister still cannot give them water certainty. It is critical that the final plan gives full and proper consideration to impacts on local communities, having regard to the region's vital role in the production and processing of food and other commodities reliant on a secure water supply. If communities are convinced that a plan will devastate regional towns or shut down Australia's food bowl, then during the consultation period in the next 68 days irrigators need to explain clearly to the minister what impact this will have on each of those communities. For example, the Wakool Shire Council is encouraging community members and other interested businesses to put their concerns to council for input and inclusion into its own submission. The shire mayor, Andrew Douglas, explained that residents have a real opportunity to voice their concerns as part of the consultation period and that council would be guided by community as to what to include in its submission. As Councillor Douglas explained:

Politicians on slim electoral margins, along with extreme minority groups, are not the only voice in the argument and we want to present the real stories of our communities that the authority and the Federal

Government must hear before any further decisions can be made.

Council is encouraging people to communicate in writing during the next two months with either general comments or more specific concerns and evidence, such as the impacts on small business, community groups and the irrigation district in general. Ideas around better management of the river and irrigation systems are also welcome, along with comments or suggestions on opportunities to assist the region through any adjustment period as a result of the plan.

The Shire of Campaspe—the great regional city of Echuca, with the paddle steamers, which I encourage everyone to get along and visit one day—is also in the process of examining the draft Basin Plan to determine its impact on the agricultural sector as well as its wider community, and is currently seeking comments from its citizens. The mayor, Kevin Simpson, said that councillors and staff attended both the Shepparton and the Deniliquin forums. Last year the Shire of Campaspe hosted a number of community sessions and asked for community comment and feedback. It is fantastic to see local councils doing what they do best, and that is that direct contact with communities. Mayor Simpson said:

We recognise the importance of getting the plan right due to its far-reaching consequences on many sectors of our community.

These are the issues of government and this is a government's core business, as we were saying earlier today. It is imperative that when the consultative process is complete Minister Tony Burke can say to the sceptical that they have a genuine opportunity to influence the Basin Plan, and that is the least that regional Victorians deserve.