



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

DOCUMENTS

National Water Commission

SPEECH

Thursday, 22 March 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 22 March 2012
Page 2669
Questioner
Speaker McKenzie, Sen Bridget

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator McKENZIE (Victoria) (18:49): I rise to take note of document No. 13, the *National Water Commission Act 2004: COAG review into the National Water Commission*. This report obviously looks at the National Water Commission, the body responsible for driving progress towards sustainable management and use of Australia's water resources under our blueprint for water reform. Under the Water Act 2007 the commission had a new and ongoing function to audit the effectiveness of the implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and associated water resource plans. Stakeholders are largely supportive of the National Water Commission and its achievements. However, there is a potential for the National Water Commission's independent standing to be reduced through being given additional tasks that support some contentious programs. Obviously, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and its implementation will be one of those.

I will turn to chapter 8 of the review itself and highlight a couple of the recommendations. Recommendation 3 states:

The purview of the NWC should encompass all reforms associated with implementation of the NWI, including the MDB reforms ...

That is incredibly contentious work. As a Victorian, I have been to the Murray-Darling Basin public meetings in my home state. There have been three throughout the 20-week consultation period, which ends in a little over 3½ weeks. There are significant issues with this plan from a southern basin perspective and I would like to talk briefly about them today.

Our communities along the Murray River in Victoria contain a vibrant and diverse people. We work hard on the land, predominantly in horticulture but also in dairy in northern Victoria. The people in towns like Mildura, Echuca, Shepparton and Cobram—obviously Mildura and Echuca are part of the Murray and lower Darling river system—and in other communities such as Swan Hill have over \$1,799 million per annum tied up in irrigated agriculture. Shepparton, which is part of the Goulburn-Broken system—it is experiencing its own particular difficulties at the moment with floods—is home to 147,000 Victorians, with \$712 million associated irrigated agricultural products. These are the areas that grow and process our food, and we need to ensure that the Murray-Darling Basin Plan takes

into consideration the socioeconomic impact of taking the water out of these communities. I know there is a Senate committee going to Mildura shortly. Hopefully they will hear directly from our communities not only about the impact that this will have on our ability to produce and process the food enjoyed by Australia and the world but also about the social and environmental impacts. I call on Victorians within the southern basin and northern Victorians right along the Murray to get out and make submissions in the last 3½ weeks. We have to make sure that our perspectives on this plan are heard and recognised.

I found it quite interesting that one of the recommendations talks about knowledge leadership and says that the function should encompass reform implementation nationally, including in the Murray-Darling Basin. That concept of knowledge leadership is something that seems to be lacking in the whole process of the development of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. Wherever I go, there are screams about a lack of data, including a lack of socioeconomic data, late release of reports such as the CSIRO reports and the hydrology reports, and a lack of detail. I am hoping that we will get answers to questions such as 'How much water does the Commonwealth actually hold at this point?' and 'How are they going to use it?' We think of the Barmah Forest, an environmental asset that has had more than its fair share of watering of late, and our trust and confidence in the Commonwealth's capacity to do this are sorely tested.