

The Water Channel

ADF's channel of communication to the farmer

1 October 2012

The more things change, the more they stay the same

It has been a while between newsletters, but then very little has changed since the last edition in early August – despite the deadline for finalising the Basin Plan in light of the States' final feedback coming and going.

As the Federal/State ministerial council was unable to agree on critical aspects by its 27 August deadline, the Federal Water Minister Tony Burke decided to allow 'a few more weeks' to try to reach a consensus.

With only four sitting weeks left and little sign of the protagonists budging (Vic and NSW both want a 2100GL cap on entitlements and SA wants more than 2750GL and preferably a target with a 3 in front of it), time is running short for Mr Burke to meet his own deadline to get the Basin Plan up by the end of 2012.

Amending the Water Act

On 20 September, the minister introduced amendments he said were necessary to seal the Basin Plan deal. Parliament then promptly flicked the Bill off to the Regional Australia Committee, chaired by Tony Windsor, for consideration, effectively buying time.

The amendments are not necessarily bad, but we believe Parliament should not vote on them until we all know exactly what the Basin Plan deal is first. The Coalition and Tony Windsor seem to agree.

More power to the MDBA

In particular, ADIC is concerned that the amendments give the MDBA power to make SDL decisions, with no ministerial or parliamentary oversight.

Yes, yes, we know the MDBA will have to consult, but bitter experience tells us it will just tick that box before it does what it wants anyway. What is really needed is a heavy hand of accountability.

A recap on where things stand

As of today, the following matters critical to the dairy industry remain unresolved:

- A mechanism allowing for the SDL to be adjusted by at least 650GL in offsets (the proposed +/-5% only allows 540GL).
- The 2750GL target met through 650GL in offsets and 2100GL in entitlements.
- All water savings to close the gap to the 2750GL target, before any thought of an upward adjustment.
- The Living Murray works to be included in the calculation of environmental offsets, as promised by the MDBA for 18 months.
- Removing new provisions added to the draft Basin Plan in July to prevent the SDL being adjusted by a full 650GL in offsets, including the undefined 'initial conditions of development' and arbitrary 'safety nets'.

Too smart by half

The amendments have also rolled ground and surface water together, to claim a 5% net SDL variation translates to 710GL – so theoretically plenty of scope for 650GL in offsets in the surface water SDL.

It is a convenient get-out-of-jail card for the politicians, but sorry guys, it won't wash. Arbitrarily rolling surface and groundwater SDLs together is not hydrologically sound, so may not result in a 650GL adjustment in the surface water SDL when subjected to technical analysis and review in 2016.

What we need is a +/-6% variation applied separately to surface water, and then groundwater.

Meetings

19 September: ADIC Basin Taskforce Chair Daryl Hoey had meetings in **Canberra** with Opposition Water Spokesman **Senator Barnaby Joyce** and his Chief of Staff, **Tony Windsor's** chief of staff, Opposition Environment spokesman **Greg Hunt** and **Tony Burke's** water adviser Sean Halse.

It was a good day to be there: with Tony Burke's proposed Water Act amendments about to hit Parliament, everyone was completely focused and engaged on the Basin Plan and what needs to change before it has any hope of getting through Parliament.

Environmental watering

The Federal Government has released its plans to deliver up to [1449GL of Commonwealth environmental water](#) for the environmental good health of Murray-Darling Basin rivers and wetlands over the coming year.

That's 1449GL on top of water allocated under State environmental entitlements, and on top of the large volumes already being spilled from Hume, Eildon, and other chock-a-block full storage dams.

The Commonwealth plans to release its water to top up naturally high flows occurring across floodplains and wetlands. Given the fine line between environmental watering and a man-made flood, we will be watching for unintended third-party impacts with interest.

Much of the water will also be headed for the Lower Lakes in South Australia, to ensure a continuous flow over the barrages to keep the Murray mouth open during summer.

We'd like to again point out that upgrading and automating the barrages would help deliver this same outcome with less water – especially in drier years when the barrages effectively block flows to the Murray mouth for six months of the year.

That might even free up water to help freshen Lake Albert – but only if the Narrung Narrows are dredged to allow a free exchange of water with Lake Alexandrina. The barrage upgrade and dredging the Narrows are among the environmental works that will deliver real environmental benefits, without undermining the viability of upstream irrigation districts in SA, Victoria and NSW by taking too much water out of their consumptive pool.

Research opportunity

The always entertaining [Ig Noble Prizes for 2012](#) were announced on 20 September. Given the reams of reports on the Basin Plan and its implications, we reckon it's odds-on that someone somewhere might actually get funding to act on the recommendations of this year's Literature winner.

LITERATURE PRIZE: The US Government General Accountability Office, for issuing a report about reports about reports, that recommends the preparation of a report about the report about reports about reports.

REFERENCE: "[Actions Needed to Evaluate the Impact of Efforts to Estimate Costs of Reports and Studies](#)," US Government General Accountability Office report GAO-12-480R, May 10, 2012.

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