

Victorian Parliament Inquiry into Rural Drainage in Victoria

Presentation to Parliamentary Committee in Hamilton on 13 Feb 2013

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Origins

Drainage schemes in Australia began in Australia over 100 years ago, based on the European agricultural scene of the 18th and 19th century.

Drainage may have been appropriate in our early period of colonisation, when most miners who left the goldfields in the 1870s and 1880s found that farming was their only realistic option to earn a living. They found a shortage of arable land and thus began the drainage of the State's wetlands, attempted first by the settlers and funded more effectively later by the State.

What has been lost due to drainage? Since settlement:

- GHCMA region has lost over 60% of wetlands to drainage (111,000 ha).
- Volcanic Plains over 75% of the Freshwater Marshes have been lost
- 90% of remaining wetlands are on private land subject to further drainage
- Certain future loss from climate change and change in land use (e.g. raised-bed cropping and plantations).

Draft Western Region Sustainable Water Strategy(2010) failed to come to grips with the environmental issues created by drainage and over allocation of water to uses other than the environment.

Draft stated (p. 206) “... *there may be insufficient flows to maintain the ecological character of a number of important wetlands, including the Ramsar listed Western District Lakes*” (on p. 7 - “*over the past 13 years streamflows have been up to 90% less than long-term averages in some parts of the region*”).

An objective was “*Increasing the amount of water for the environment*” (p. 99). But (p. 103), “*There are few options for increasing water available for lakes and wetlands in the Western Region*”.

The Water Strategy stated that the status quo be retained in most aspects of water management.

Our conclusions:

- over-allocation of water for agriculture and other uses, with no consideration for the environment.
- Water to maintain biodiversity in rivers, streams, wetlands and aquifers is critical.
- climate is certain to be drier, and these assets have been seriously degraded.
- current deplorable situation will get worse, whether or not climate change is a factor
- DSE was very timid and failed to provide any real options

There was no mention anywhere of the option to restore drained wetlands. The Draft could only manage an oblique reference (p. 168) to “*improved management of drains*”! There is no mention of the very effective and practical OPTION of purchasing major drained wetlands and blocking the drains.

Some drainage schemes will have to be changed if we are to retain functional wetlands and biodiversity.

Large, drained wetlands (such as the 3,000 ha Buckley Swamp near Hamilton, Brady Swamp near Dunkeld, Mt William Swamp near Willaura and The Morass near Moyston, all with good stream flows could and should be restored and would then be high-value wetlands of International standing. Why was this option not even mentioned? If we are to make any progress in restoring our wetlands we have to consider the restoration of some key, large wetlands.

We need to restore drained wetlands from 500-3000 ha in extent:

- large enough to hold some water for more than 1-2 years following good rainfall
- variable in depth across the wetland to provide for different plant and fauna species
- large enough to enable waterbirds to breed successfully (i.e. to avoid predation from foxes). Wetlands of a few hectares cannot do that, although they may provide feeding and breeding opportunities for various waterbird species, including Brolga.

Costs

The restoration of wetlands will involve installation of weirs and control of drainage. It will involve purchase – and that will be expensive. However, the latter option will, in the long term, be more effective and less expensive than playing about with a host of tiny wetlands whose future is increasingly problematic, and management increasingly difficult, due to lack of field staff in DSE and PV.

Who pays, who benefits and who loses from drainage?

- Any scheme that is retained should be paid for by the landholders who might benefit from the drainage. If it is not profitable for the landholders to finance the works and associated management the scheme should lapse.
- Taxpayers do not benefit from supporting drainage works.
- Drainage of wetlands causes a loss of biodiversity and economic opportunity through diminished tourism across the entire landscape of Western Victoria.
- Restoration of swamp habitat is rapid and without cost once water is restored.

Barriers to reform of Rural Drainage Schemes

- A barrier to action to modify a drainage scheme for environmental benefit is that there is no effective, responsible management.
- Shires have control of the Drainage Schemes, under the Local Government Act. They have no real expertise in the drainage issues, or interest in better management of water.
- The CMAs should have the authority over rural drainage, under the Water Act. Until this situation is resolved it is unlikely that any effective action will be possible.

State-funded rural drainage for agriculture is not appropriate now. Are we so rooted to the past that we cannot contemplate change?