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17 Dec 2012

Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Spring St
East Melbourne Vic 3002

Submission re. Parliamentary Inquiry into Rural Drainage in Victoria

Our submission is pertinent to Parts 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. This inquiry comes on the heels of the **Draft Western Region Sustainable Water Strategy(2010)**, which failed to come to grips with the environmental issues created by drainage and over allocation of water to uses other than the environment.

The Draft of the **Western Region Sustainable Water Strategy (2010)** suggested that the status quo should be retained in most aspects of water management. We believe that would perpetuate mistakes made in specific cases. It would also have set in concrete past anthropocentric policies where there was an over-allocation of water for agriculture and other uses, with no consideration at all for the environment. Water to maintain biodiversity in rivers, streams, wetlands and aquifers is critical. If that is not recognised then there is no hope for a sustainable future for these environmental assets in a climate that is certain to be drier, and when many of these assets have been seriously degraded.

What has been lost due to drainage? Since settlement, we have lost over 60% of wetlands in the GHCMA region to drainage (111,000 ha lost). On the Volcanic Plains over 75% of the Freshwater Marshes have been lost (on 1994 figures which are now outdated) and 90% of the remaining depleted wetlands are on private land that is subject to further drainage, loss from climate change and change in land use (e.g. adjacent raised-bed cropping and plantations). Dismal projections of future loss were acknowledged in the Draft Water Strategy but no solutions offered to remedy the matter.

Our reading of the **Draft Western Region Sustainable Water Strategy(2010)** suggested that DSE was very timid and failed to provide any real remedies for a resolution of the problem of past and projected future wetland loss, despite the acknowledgment in the Draft that the current deplorable situation will get worse, whether or not climate change is a factor.

The closest the Draft got to addressing the issue of loss of wetlands was on p. 206 – “*The Department of Sustainability and Environment will work with catchment management authorities to identify opportunities to protect high value wetlands at risk from rural drainage. For some lakes of high environment value, there may be opportunities to modify drainage schemes to improve water regimes or mitigate the impacts of climate change*”. This was dreadfully meek. And why only the present high-value wetlands? Several 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) 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? Are we so rooted to the past that we cannot contemplate change?

A realistic solution would have been to propose that some drainage schemes will have to be changed if we are to retain functional wetlands and biodiversity. On p. 206 of that Draft it was stated “... *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 it is stated that “*over the past 13 years streamflows have been up to 90% less than long-term averages in some parts of the region*”). The Draft should have provided some OPTIONS to address this issue.

We maintain that the best option is to seek drained wetlands that are fed by more reliable streams and to fill in the drains from those wetlands or instal weirs to regulate the flows. If we are to make any progress in restoring our wetlands we have to consider the restoration of some key, large wetlands. Lake Condah has been a good start, but it is only 250 ha in extent.

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.

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 inexpensive 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.

With the current spate of wind-powered electricity generators mooted for SW Victoria (currently around 1000) there will be a continued loss of the endangered Brolga due to collisions when flocks move from feeding and resting grounds. To offset these certain losses, investment by restoring large wetlands is going to be required if we are to maintain a population through increased breeding success. As important are other migratory species that rely on our wetlands for feeding in the summer-autumn, and waterbirds such as Painted Snipe, Australasian Bittern, Brolga and Magpie Geese that depend upon wetlands for breeding opportunities in winter-spring.

Rural Drainage

One stated objective in the Draft to offset the continuing loss of wetlands was “*Increasing the amount of water for the environment*” (p. 99). However, on p. 103 of the Draft, came the statement “*There are few options for increasing water available for lakes and wetlands in the Western Region*”. There was no mention anywhere of the option to restore drained wetlands. The nearest the Draft could manage was 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.

Even with the Lake Corangamite issue, there was no analysis of the option of closing down the damaging drainage structure. How can it be that this magnificent lake, once the largest body of permanent water in Australia, and a Ramsar Wetland of International significance, was allowed to be degraded by diverting 90% of its water, all for the sake of reducing natural flooding on 1700 ha of land in some years? And why the failure now to promote an effective and urgent return to the former condition of the lake (the full capacity, not just the 50% that was suggested as a compromise).

Modelling showed it unlikely that floods would create much or any future problem. If there were floods then there are 2 ways, not canvassed in the Draft, to overcome the problem:

1. Buy out the affected owners (the amount of private land is very small compared with the area and value of the lake) or
2. Accept the slight risk of a flood and, if it happens, pay compensation for any lost production – this would always be cheaper than maintaining a perpetual drainage infrastructure (the annual maintenance cost is reported to be around \$200,000).

Barriers to reform of Rural Drainage Schemes

It has been suggested that a real barrier to action in closing or modifying drains is that there is no effective, responsible management. Control of the Drainage Schemes is given to the Shires, under the Local Government Act, and they collect any landholder rates for the schemes. The Shires have no real expertise in the drainage issues, or interest in better management of water for environmental purposes.

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. One difficulty is the possible disinclination of Shires to collect the rates on behalf of the CMAs, although the Draft indicates that few rates are actually collected now (p.168).

It is suggested that many drainage schemes are in recess; many farmers object to paying for drainage that is not required, and others question whether drainage has gone too far, some suggesting that weirs be installed to control the flows.

Who pays and who benefits from drainage?

In 1980 there was a Parliamentary enquiry into Drainage Trusts, headed by Mr. M Tricarico, Secretary of the Public Bodies Review Committee. A submission was made from Hamilton, concerning the operation of the Yatchaw Drainage Trust. It was pointed out that taxpayers then contributed \$6 for every \$1 from the landholders who supposedly benefitted from the drainage. The area of land under the trust was 3,500 ha although it was spuriously claimed that it affected 24,000 ha. Attempts to drain Buckley Swamp began in the mid 1870s, continuing to 1949 with State funding to dig a deeper trench through a rise and emptying into Muddy Creek. It was claimed that 28 or 30 farmers contributed to the scheme in 1980 (the total contribution in 1979 from landholders was \$1877, so each individual paid about \$63 and the State picked up the tab for \$9,387 in that year). We believe that ratio of support continues. The Shire of Southern Grampians listed a recurrent expenditure of \$20,132 in the June 2011 budget.

We contended then that the general ratepayer/taxpayer did not benefit from supporting the drainage works and that, if the scheme should continue, the landholders should bear the total costs. The landholders purportedly benefitted from the drainage by being able to graze the swamp, whereas a large portion of the general public did not benefit in any way. *'The Great Swamp'* was once deemed to be *"the most remarkable feature in the district around Hamilton ... home of myriads of waterfowl.. snipe in countless numbers around the edges "* (Bruni 1903). The general public has continued to pay for the loss of a key landscape feature that contributed greatly to biodiversity in the region. Those benefits were largely lost when the swamp was drained and those benefits need to be restored. It should be noted that restoration of the swamp habitat is rapid and without cost once water is restored.

Drainage of wetlands causes a loss of biodiversity and economic opportunity through diminished tourism across the entire landscape of Western Victoria. Regional tourism would benefit greatly through restoration of wetlands such as Buckley Swamp – it would rival (if not exceed) Bool Lagoon in SE South Australia, which is of a comparable size. Bool Lagoon is a mecca for hundreds of bird observers and other visitors who enjoy the surroundings, and it provides support for the rural economy. Bool Lagoon does not have the nearby volcanic attractions that Buckley Swamp has and the economic potential of a major wetland development near Hamilton should have greater potential.

Any rural drainage scheme that is retained should be paid for entirely by the landholders who might benefit from the drainage. There is no legitimate case for the general public paying for a practice that confers no benefit to them and actually confers a loss in biodiversity, landscape and tourism potential for the region and State. If it is not profitable for the landholders to finance the continuing management and works associated with a drainage scheme then, in economic rationalist terms, the scheme should lapse.

It is time to wake up! This anachronism from the European agricultural scene of the 18th and 19th century was transplanted into Australia over 100 years ago and should now be consigned to history. 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. That practice is not appropriate now.

Yours faithfully

Dr PR Bird OAM

Secretary
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