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### **Submission to MDBA Inquiry into Menindee Lakes**

#### **Introduction**

The Inland Rivers Network (IRN) is a coalition of environment groups and individuals that has been advocating for healthy rivers, wetlands and groundwater in the Murray-Darling Basin since 1991.

The MDBA has initiated an inquiry into all aspects of the management of the Menindee Lakes, prior to proposing a number of options. Views on the future of the lakes have been solicited from interested parties.

IRN and member groups have had a long term interest in the management of Menindee Lakes and the Darling River. We welcome the opportunity to provide input into this process and note that any trade-offs to be made through changed management arrangements should not include more trade-off at the expense of the environment. The major trade-off impacting the ecological values of Menindee Lakes was made 70 years ago with the infrastructure development and Inter Government Agreement between the Basin states.

#### **Who Should Manage the Lakes?**

Currently the water in the lakes is controlled by NSW until the volume exceeds 640 GL, when control passes to the MDBA. As volume diminishes, the water is controlled by MDBA until there is less than 480 GL, when NSW regains control. The physical work on the lakes infrastructure is undertaken by NSW.

Water in the lakes is owned 50:50 by NSW and Victoria and much of it is used to supply the mandated minimum volume of water for South Australia.

NSW had good reasons to retain an interest in control of the water until recently. Recent developments have changed that:

1. Broken Hill now obtains its water from the Murray River
2. Properties along the Anabranch obtain their mandated water from a pipeline accessed from either the Murray or from Menindee Lakes.
3. The major irrigator Tandou Ltd has sold its water licences to the Commonwealth.
4. Most of the irrigators on the lower Darling/Baaka have been converted to dryland farming.

From the point of view of output of water, the NSW Government now has very little reason to retain any control. However, input of water into Menindee Lakes is almost totally controlled by NSW via Water Sharing Plans on the Barwon-Darling/Baaka and most of its tributaries. Queensland is a lesser supplier of water input, and that input comes via the Water Sharing Plan on the Barwon-Darling/Baaka.

Should the MDBA take over total control of a lake system dependent almost entirely on water input from NSW? Also should the MDBA operate a system of lakes in the middle of a river where NSW controls the upstream and downstream sections? ***Perhaps the MDBA should take control of the entire Barwon-Darling/Baaka, both upstream and downstream of the Menindee Lakes and run it as a single entity.*** The Darling/Baaka is the unique connection between the Northern and Southern Murray-Darling Basin, unlike all of the other NSW rivers.

The input from Queensland could be improved through the Basin Plan Review and new Sustainable Diversion Limits. The claw back of 70 GL to the Northern Basin during the Basin Plan negotiations must be reviewed. This additional water supply for environmental health would provide much needed flows for the Darling/Baaka and assist with the challenges of managing the Menindee Lake system.

### **Should Menindee Lakes be Managed for Water Supply/Distribution or for the Environment?**

This question was surprisingly put forward in the MDBA Technical Report. Surprising because of the documented importance of Menindee Lakes for water supply in the lower Murray River, both to Victorian irrigators and to the mandated minimum water flow into South Australia. One factor in this importance is the restricted flow through the Barmah Choke on the Murray, exacerbated by the current sand slug. Another factor is the difference in seasonal water availability between the Darling/Baaka and the Murray.

It is unrealistic to imagine that Menindee Lakes will not be required for water supply/distribution, so the question should be to what extent should Menindee Lakes be managed for the environment.

IRN recognises that the Menindee Lakes are a major nursery for native fish and one of the most important water bird features in the Murray-Darling Basin. Geoff Looney from

Menindee has identified over 200 species of birds that live in, or have visited the Menindee Lakes area. The Menindee Lakes wetland partly compensates for the destruction of other wetlands within the basin, and should be given Ramsar status.

Before the lakes were modified for the purposes of water supply/distribution in the 1960s, Menindee Lakes were a natural group of ephemeral lakes dependent on overflow from Darling/Baaka River floods. They developed complex ecosystems adapted to wetting and drying cycles. In recent years Lake Wetherell has been managed to reproduce that wetting and drying cycle. Lake Wetherell was formed by flooding several meanders of the Darling/Baaka River and comprises the old river channel plus flooded floodplain. Storage heights can be manipulated to produce flooding and drying on the old floodplain.

***IRN encourages whichever authority manages the lakes to balance the need for downstream water supply, with appropriate environmental management of the lakes' ecosystems.*** This may lead to conflicts, for example rapid drawdown from a lake does not reproduce natural evaporative loss and can leave flora/fauna stranded.

The protection and management of Held Environmental Water (HEW) is a critical factor in the management of the Lakes and water releases. HEW must be a key consideration in any new arrangements and be available when needed.

#### **Should Weir 32 be Removed Entirely?**

***IRN encourages the MDBA to investigate the need for the continued existence of Weir 32.*** Weir 32 creates a 40 km -long weir pool from which the water supply for Broken Hill and Menindee were pumped. The weir pool is no longer required for Broken Hill and the water supply for Menindee could be obtained from elsewhere, for example from the better water quality in Lake Wetherell.

The weir pool has been the location of major fish-kills of national and international concern. The primary reason has been the depletion of oxygen in this often-stagnant weir pool. Other reasons include the lack of fish access up-river past the Main Weir, and the explosive breeding of carp and bony bream. A major contributor to these crises is the diminution of inflows into Menindee Lakes during all times except floods, due to extraction upstream. Another factor is the location of the Lake Menindee outlet, very close to Weir 32, resulting in bank-up of water upstream in the weir pool, producing a lack of flow situation.

The weir pool of 40 kms is a major problem for native fish habitat particularly for flow specialists such as Murray Cod to achieve successful breeding outcomes.

***In the MDBA Technical Report there is a suggestion that moveable gates be installed in Weir 32 and the Pooncarie weir. IRN consider this to be a half-measure and an unnecessary expense, when there is no obvious need for Weir 32. Consideration must be given to removing Weir 32 altogether, or at least substantially lowering the height so that natural flows regimes can be improved. This would be a better investment outcome.***

### **Enlarging the Lake Menindee Outlet to 14 GL per Day**

Another option considered in the MDBA Technical Report is the enlargement of the Lake Menindee outlet to 14 GL per day. ***IRN strongly opposes this disastrous suggestion.***

Enlargement to 14 GL per day would require:

1. Artificially enlarging Menindee Creek outside the lake.
2. Dredging Menindee Creek inside the lake.
3. Enlarging the lower Darling/Baaka River channel.
4. Constructing gates where the Anabranch feeds off the Darling/Baaka.
5. Constructing gates on ephemeral lakes that feed off the lower Darling/Baaka.

***This suggestion is expensive and monstrous and is totally opposed.***

An earlier proposal, in 2007, was to enlarge the Lake Menindee outlet from the current 4.5 GL/day, to 10 GL/day. The current lower Darling/Baaka channel could accommodate this flow, so 3, 4 and 5 above would not be required. However, the environmental effects of rapid drawdown on Lake Menindee would need to be considered.

### **A Regulator between Lakes Menindee and Cawndilla**

In the 1960s a regulator was constructed between Lakes Menindee and Cawndilla, but it was washed away. Since then every inquiry into the lakes has considered whether a new regulator should be built. The situation is complex:

1. There are potential evaporation savings by being able to control the overflow from Lake Menindee into Lake Cawndilla and vice versa.
2. There are environmental considerations on the resulting rapid draw-downs that could occur.
3. The Morton Bulka Channel that joins the lakes, and the nearby Lake Eurobilli are of important cultural significance to local First Nation people.

***This issue requires detailed consideration. IRN requests consultation on any future proposals for such a regulator.***

### **The Barwon-Darling/Baaka, One River Artificially Divided**

The Darling/Baaka River is a river artificially divided into a Barwon-Darling River above Menindee Lakes and a Murray-Lower Darling River below Menindee Lakes. This is offensive to First Nation people, especially the Barkintji (people of the Baaka) and is geographically unsound. It is the result of rivers being seen as pipelines for distributing water to irrigators, rather than important natural environmental features.

The question of who should control Menindee Lakes, should be considered in the context of the position of the lakes being half-way down a single river, not at the junction of two pipelines.

***The IRN strongly recommends that the Darling/Baaka River and the Menindee Lakes be managed as a single entity.***

### **A Fishway Around the Main Weir**

Major fish kills have occurred in the Menindee weirpool. Two major drivers have been that there were too many fish and not enough oxygen. The fish have not been able to escape upstream. It is recognised by all researchers and administrators that a fishway is required to allow the fish to move upstream and bypass the Main Weir. Currently a temporary fishway is being trialled, and it has been recognised that a permanent fishway is needed. ***IRN strongly supports the construction of a permanent fishway.***

### **Further Discussion**

There are undoubtedly many more aspects of the management of Menindee Lakes that will require discussion. Only a few have been covered here. The IRN is available for further discussion on all aspects. Please contact:

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