



## MACQUARIE MARSHES ENVIRONMENTAL LANDHOLDERS ASSOCIATION

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### **Introduction:**

The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA) was formed in 1995 when there was increasing pressure to further reduce water flows to the Macquarie Marshes. Its members are local landholders, many of whom are third and fourth generation landholders in the area, and all are dedicated to ensuring a healthy and productive marsh for future generations.

The aim of MMELA is:

*The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA) aims to ensure the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the internationally recognised Macquarie Marshes.*

The Macquarie Marshes is a large semi-permanent, **flow through** wetland on the lower end of the Macquarie River in central western NSW. It covers an area of approximately 200,000ha of which 12% is a Nature Reserve managed by the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS). The remaining 88% is privately owned freehold land which supports an extensive agricultural industry. Much of the land has been held in families for generations and the property owners have an extraordinary knowledge and understanding of all aspects of the Marshes and its management.

The Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve, “Wilgara” Wetland and U Block are listed on the Ramsar Convention of Wetlands of International Importance. The Nature Reserve is also listed on the Japan - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (JAMBA) and the China - Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (CAMBA) along with several other agreements. It is the responsibility of the whole community, including State and Federal Governments, to ensure management of the wetland does not compromise values and/or obligations set out in the above mentioned agreements.

The Macquarie Marshes is unique both environmentally and economically. Research indicates it is the most important colonial nesting waterbird breeding site in Australia for species diversity and nesting density (*Kingsford and Thomas 1995*). The majority of the breeding colonies are situated on privately owned land where landholders have managed and protected them since settlement. The Marshes also support an extensive cattle grazing industry which is its main economic focus. Sustainable grazing is encouraged by MMELA and the majority of landholders are acutely aware of the environmental needs of the wetland and undertake congruent management practices.

Government policy and decision making relating to natural resource management has in the past had devastating impacts on the Marshes, particularly water management, which has severely reduced water flows through river regulation and other such legislation.

When Burrendong Dam was completed and irrigation was established throughout the Macquarie Valley scientific research showed flows to the internationally recognised Macquarie Marshes were greatly decreased. MMELA brought this to the attention of many governments and fought for water to be recovered for this diverse and unique wetland and its associated floodplain. As a result both the NSW and Federal Governments introduced 'buy back' programs and improved efficiency schemes in an effort to halt the ongoing destruction of the Macquarie Marshes. It must be remembered that these programs only returned a small portion of the water originally taken from the Macquarie Marshes and the landholders who depend on its health and vitality to make their living.

There are few things more contentious than water! And this is very apparent at present as we debate the future of water management in the Murray Darling Basin.

Underpinning the debate is everyone's concern for the future and what a changed water environment will mean for them and their family, their business and their grandchildren. Questions arise such as: Will it mean less food production? Will it mean more expensive food? Will it mean healthier rivers with more productive floodplains and wetlands and no net change in food production? Will communities survive? How can we manage with less water and how will we share the water in a fair and equitable way? Will future generations say we were wise, that we heeded lessons of the past, that we were considerate and caring about both people and the environment? So many questions and no easy answers!

I think it is important to step back to understand how this happened and make sure we do not repeat history, as so often happens. The Macquarie Valley is an example of the mismanagement of New South Wales water resources by a succession of governments and water agencies over the last 40 years.

When Burrendong dam was completed in 1966/67 the yield of the Macquarie River was assessed as 406000Megalitres (ML). By 1978 the water users in the valley, most of whom were irrigators (agriculture uses about 80% of the allocated water), advised the Water Resources Commission (WRC) that the river was over allocated and an embargo should be placed on the issue of future water licenses. In 1979 the WRC introduced the embargo but at the same time raised the annual estimated yield of the river to 475000ML and continued to issue licenses so that permissible extraction rose to 497500ML.

Original licenses stipulated the area of land that could be irrigated but not the volume of water used. To remedy this anomaly, volumetric allocations were introduced. This system apportioned volumes of water (Megalitres/hectare) to a property and the property owner then decided how the water could be most productively used. Other valleys in NSW were allocated 6ML/ha but the Macquarie Valley was allocated 8ML/ha for irrigators on river schemes. For Off River schemes the standard 6ML/ha was agreed. By 1985 the total allocated water was 612000ML of which 452000ML was for riparian irrigators and 160000ML for off river schemes. As the revised estimated long term average yield of the river was 475000ML the Macquarie was now over committed by 137000ML more than the revised yield of 475000ML and 206000ML more than the original yield of 406000ML.

It gets worse! In 1985 allocations to existing licenses were increased by about 13000ML despite concerns and objections from stakeholder groups. From then to now the allocations for extractive use have risen to 738000ML for the Macquarie/Cudgegong system (the Cudgegong River flows into Burrendong Dam from the Mudgee area). An additional 160000ML was also allocated to the environment despite the fact it was obvious the already over allocated river could not yield the 160000ML. The total allocation of regulated and supplementary flow water for the system is therefore now the grand total of 898793ML, almost double the revised estimated 1979 yield of 475000ML<sup>1</sup>.

With such mismanagement the damage is widespread, indiscriminate and long lasting!

And what sort of environment will we leave for future generations? Our wetlands which provide ecosystem services and support a great diversity of plants and animals have decreased in number and size. They have been radically changed by the fewer and smaller floods which are now the norm. The environment deserves better than that.

MMELA have been waiting for the release of the CAP factors and are in strong disagreement with the raising of the general security water CAP factor from 0.42 % in 2011 to 0.56% while the actual reliability of a water entitlement in the Macquarie has reduced and struggling to be higher than 30%.

We have concerns that the proposed cap factor is inconsistent with recent history of use and the previous BDL model average use provided by DOI water.

While the average use plus trade since water sharing plan (WSP) inception is not quoted, we anecdotally know it is in the range of 0.30% to 0.40%.

We also are aware that there has been a change away from the previous BDL **without any explanation for the reason for this change.**

We also have concerns with the proposed change to the Macquarie Supplementary access cap factor from 0.210% in 2011 to 0.588% in this document. The average use plus trade during the duration of the current WSP is 0.202%.

No actual utilisation figure is quoted in your document .The previous DOI water document indicated an average use of only 10.2gl/year which is only a quarter ( 1/4 ) of that quoted in the cap factor document of 29,3gl/year. This is supported by the actual usage since the plan has been in place (2004) **No explanation** is given for this change?

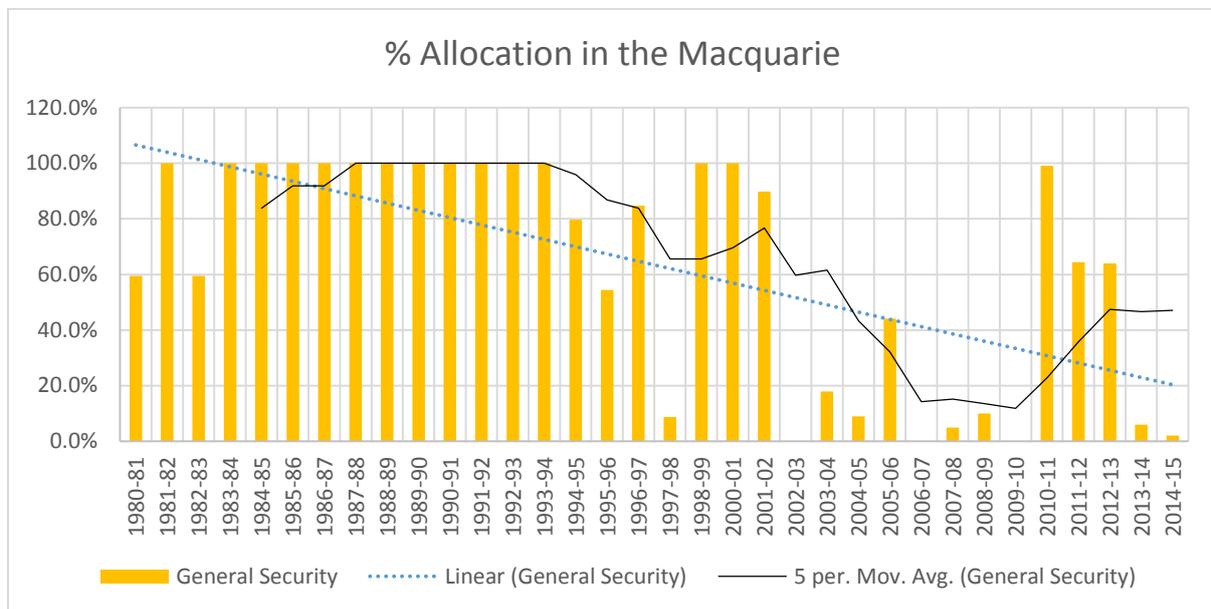
The proposed change to the cap factors in the Macquarie will leave us with a flow regime that will fail to meet objectives of critical ecosystem function as well as having negative impacts on those that receive beneficial flooding for their production systems.

We are also extremely concerned that the proposed changes to the cap factors does not include the impact of floodplain harvesting. The Macquarie has a 50gl/year upper limit on Supplementary access take and if the floodplain harvesting policy goes ahead there will be a huge loss to the planned environmental water volume reaching the marshes, there has been no allowance made within the 2004 WSP in the Macquarie. (Part 8- limit to available water 30-3D of 2004 Water sharing plan) No volume is stated and it is clear that any floodplain harvest take must be included in (under) the long term extraction limit.

MMELA cannot accept why the cap factor has been raised while the actual reliability has continued to decline and if DOI water go ahead with the change at some stage in the future there will need to be further water recovered for the environment once again resulting in social impacts while continuing to create uncertainty for all water dependant community's.

# MMELA completely reject the proposed changes to the cap factors.

Please find a graph of actual water allocation in the Macquarie from 1980 until 2015.



Thank you for the opportunity to have our say

*Regards Garry Hall*

