

Independent assessment of the northern basin first flush event 2020

Please accept my submission to the panel in regard to the NSW government handling of tributary flows that became available during February 2020.

I live and work with my family in the Macquarie Marshes in central west NSW. My family have had continuous ownership of our land for 86 years and I'm the 4th generation family member to relay on this land for our living.

Sustainable land management has underpinned our business for the last 30 years and part of our land is listed under the Ramsar convention (U block) that we graze beef cattle an under the wise use principal. As a private Ramsar manager I have a Ramsar management plan for the site and take extremely seriously the responsibilities around responsible land management.

I also have an interest in the way environmental water is managed and have held the position of our community representative on our local Environmental water advisory group, locally known as the environmental flows reference group (EFRG) for 12 years. I am also the president of our local landholder conservation group ,The Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders association, MMELA as well as having sat for many years on the stakeholder advisory panel (sap) firstly undertaking a remake of the 2004 water sharing plan that ended up becoming the water resource plan development.

The events that took place during the period of Feb/March 2020 has left me with a complete lack of confidence in the NSW governments commitment the water management act 2000 .Water management principles. 2a Water source, floodplains and dependent ecosystems (including groundwater and wetlands) should be **protected and restored**.

It first needs to be made very clear that there are major differences in the approach by different sections of the NSW department's .The two agencies fall under the broad banner of planning industry and environment. The department that manages the environmental water is under the banner of environment Energy and science group (EES) the other is DPIE water /science.

After many years of prolonged drought and the Macquarie valley being under level 4 drought management, the regulated reach (continuous flow for last 52 years) had been shortened to the Warren weir with boards placed on top of the weir itself to capture any extra flows to be directed to high security licences. Over 100,000mgI had been placed into a drought account including large portion of both HEW and the planned environmental water (EWA) as a result of the NSW government policy of allocating water to licences that hasn't fallen as rain yet.

The majority of the water holes along the Macquarie had begun to dry up and the native fish had been evacuated. All water of any type had dried up from Oxley station to the Barwon River, over 150km of river channel. The drying up of the river had not happened for at least 52 years and as a member of the river operations stakeholder consultation committee (ROSCCO) I was well informed that there was a drought management plan in place when flows did finally return to the river.

During February 2020 some small flows started to become available from tributary flows downstream of the major dam (Burrendong) ,as planned this water was to start the wetting of the regulated reach of the Macquarie ,this went ahead uneventfully. During these small flows there was

another rain event across the catchment and much larger volumes of water became available to the river operator.(Water NSW)

It came as a shock that water NSW called for supplementary access (5000gl) at warren well before many stock and domestic replenishment flows had been delivered. I was keen to find out why this had been granted and who had made the call (which agency) under such extreme conditions. On making contact with EES I was told that that department had been excluded from the decision to grant supplementary access, the reason there was a perceived conflict of interest. I would really like to know who made the decision that EES had a perceived conflict of interest, remembering that EES are tasked with the management of environmental water and have many years of experience in managing environmental flows as well as an accurate understanding of the environmental water needs of the Macquarie Marshes after the exceptionally long period of no flows. **So who made this call??**

As it turned out the decision was left in the hands of DPIE water and science and I strongly believe that this was a mistake. What happened for the next few days was a complete disgrace with regular phone calls to people trying to understand why the NSW government had allowed large volumes of water to be extracted by firstly supplementary access then by floodplain harvesting.

The impact of the take of the lead of the first flow in the Valley for many years will be a scar on the landscape for years to come. After years of drought the groundcover had been reduced to a minimum ,when the first flows arrived the mixed marsh vegetation community began the long journey to start recovery ,the area that failed to receive the first flow was able to be colonised by invasive weeds such as lippia ,once established the lippia was able to out compete the mixed marsh plants such as water couch ,brown beetle grass ,common reed and marsh club rush.

The next thing that happened was a complete surprise, I was forwarded an email from the A/Executive director, policy planning and science, regarding the announcement of supplementary access being granted in the Macquarie was "quote" **there will be insufficient flows to achieve the marshes flooding targets and these flows will not connect to the Barwon Darling.**

This was complete rubbish and I was again surprised to learn that this decision had been made with reference to the environmental water requirements outlined in the long term environmental water plan. As I happened to be consulted during the development of the LTEWP I was very surprised that it was being used as evidence as to grant supplementary take or allow floodplain harvesting. I was sure that this document was not intended to be used in this way ,its common sense that after many long years drought that the environmental watering requirements for the marshes and the possibility for river connectivity must be of the highest priority.

As a result of this quote being used to support the allowing of supplementary access I decided that the agency (policy planning and science) did not have the knowledge, experience or skills to be making such decisions. I chose to start ringing everyone who I could get to listen and explain that as a private Ramsar manager and marsh landholder the decision was wrong and the supportive evidence was rubbish.

If it was a result of my endless phone calls and finally talking directly to Vanessa O'Keefe, I do not really care but the next time (soon afterwards) there was a trib flow in the Macquarie the department chose not to grant supplementary access be granted.

Now that some of the large irrigators who had access to floodplain harvesting flows ,there began some water trade of supplementary access water (temp trade) ,this really stirred licence holders up

as they started to trade water before supplementary access was granted (as a result of the first event being granted) and when the water trade happened and supplementary access wasn't granted .This whole situation could have been avoided if the environmental water team (EES) had been allowed to have major input into the decision to both lift the embargo on floodplain harvesting and allow supplementary access to be granted for the first event.

Please find attached the 2003 regulated water sharing plan that had reference to the environmental water advisory group being consulted in regard to allowing supplementary access.

Please find attached the reference of the environmental water requirements from the long term environmental watering plan.

Please find attached a printed copy of the Macquarie river gauge at Gibson's way, the closest gauge upstream of the Ramsar site U block. The flow heights clearly shows the impact to the Marshes and connectivity to the Barwon of allowing supplementary access.

The talk of a first flush event in the Macquarie when the complete mismanagement of the river as a result of complete incompetence by the department, policy, planning and science is a misleading term.

If anything is to come out of this enquiry ,it would make things much easier if the NSW government left decisions like supplementary access to the environmental water agency (EES) and if they could use the environmental water advisory group to help with the decision.

The whole process is shameful and will leave a scar on the landscape for many years to come.

Regards Garry Hall [REDACTED]

Please contact me if you need anything explained.

- 141.00

Discharge (ML/d)

17-3-200



Planning unit	Gauge	Low flows		Freshes		Overbank	
		Very low	Baseflow	Small	Large	Small	Large
MACQUARIE MARSHES							
Northern and Southern river flow thresholds (Macquarie River downstream Marebone & Oxley Station)	421090, 421022	25	65	300	1,000	2,900@ downstream Marebone 2600 @ Oxley Station	
Whole of Macquarie Marshes wetland flows – Northern, Southern & Eastern Marshes (@combined Macquarie River & Marebone Break below Marebone gauges)	421088 + 421090					For core wetlands (small overbank/ wetland 1): 60,000 ML over 90 days For wetland non-woody vegetation (small overbank/ wetland 4): 100,000 ML within 90 days	440,000 ML within 150 days
Eastern Marsh wetland flow (Gum Cowal @ Bifurcation)	421146						Covered by whole of Marshes flow – see above.
LOWER MACQUARIE RIVER							
Lower Macquarie (@ Bells Bridge (Carinda))	421012	10	65	140	700	1,900	Not determined
LOWER MARTHAGUY CREEK							
Marthaguy Creek (@ Carinda)	421011	20	20	70	800	2,900	Not determined

promote the breeding success of the native fish.

- (10) The Minister should seek advice from the Environmental Flows Reference Group if established under clause 15 (23) regarding whether or not progress, as described in subclause (9) can be demonstrated, and if so, the appropriate changes to the flow threshold specified in subclause (5) and the time at which they will apply.

- (11) In any water year, the holder of a supplementary water access licence may not take