



INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL
AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE BASIN

Independent Assessment of Social and Economic Conditions in the Murray-Darling Basin

Key messages from stakeholder consultations in southern NSW and northern
Victoria – 30 September to 4 October 2019

On behalf The Hon. David Littleproud MP,
Australian Government
Minister for Water Resources, Drought, Rural Finance,
Natural Disaster and Emergency Management

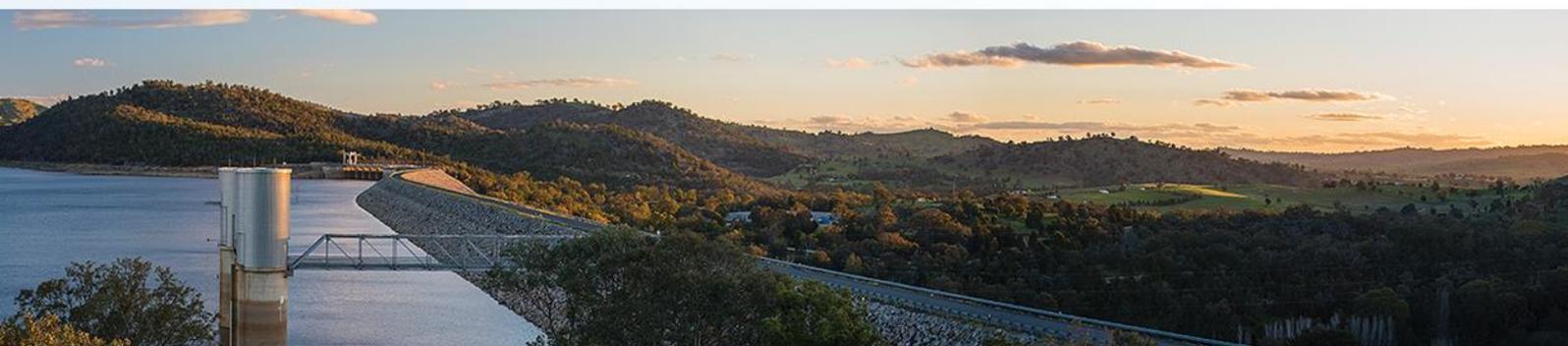




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Overview and key themes

Panel Members David McKenzie and Bruce Simpson undertook consultation in southern NSW and northern Victoria between 30 September and October 4, meeting with a range of stakeholders from across the region. This document contains detailed summaries from each of the engagement sessions. The summaries do not necessarily reflect views of the Panel and are not a direct transcript. They have been edited to ensure privacy of participants. This stakeholder engagement will inform the development of the Panel's Interim and Final Reports.

Engagement sessions were held in:

- Griffith
- Coleambally
- Deniliquin
- Hay
- Balranald
- Swan Hill
- Wakool
- Shepparton
- Cobram
- Cohuna.

Engagement sessions included a mixture of public open sessions, and targeted roundtables to ensure the engagement captured both a broad cross section of communities (including stakeholders from health, education, First Nations, agriculture, agriculture supply chain, local government and business chambers and more) through targeted sessions, as well as providing open public forums. This was a deliberate choice to avoid the risk that some voices or perspectives may not have been heard.

David and Bruce would like to thank everyone who attended for their time and input. If you were unable to attend or would like to make a further contribution, the Panel's [online survey](#) will remain open until 30 October 2019. The Panel will be delivering its Interim Report to government by December 2019.



Key Messages from Griffith Roundtable Session

9am – 11am, 30th September 2019, Griffith City Council

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Griffith probably hasn't suffered as badly as other areas, but have only been growing slowly. Have lost a lot of water, the statistics look reasonable, but could be a lot better. Also left out of nuts in this area which stalled our ability to grow.
- General health is poor and has declined since 2008, even with a lot of money coming in through the Basin Plan. MDBA community profiles said we were the most resilient community in the Basin, but not sure we see that in our economy, not with 6% allocation and high prices.
- Agriculture supply and engineering businesses have done well, agglomeration and automation have created some opportunities.
- Big shift in population (lots of people exiting and coming in).
- Griffith was the first and most radically impacted through buyback (so got hit early) and we have largely got through it, but have lower resilience.
- Experience housing collapse, we lost ~20% of residential and ~40% of commercial (fell out completely), everything got recalibrated / valued and banks came knocking.
- Banks have still managed to grow rural assets – have been growing in value and commodity prices have been extremely good (and citrus strong).
- Whether it is drought or reform it is still just about management. Different levels of management in business. The top producers are planning and making provisions for what is around the corner and they thrive in these circumstances (they get ahead) – so the absolute best are going fine, their biggest challenge is taxation policy.



- Farmers are feeling cumulative impacts of agricultural change, drought and Basin Plan. Those factors combine to drive uncertainty. In Coleambally there is a narrower economy, so we are worried and see uncertainty and recovery as a big threat.
- Discretionary spend is lower as is confidence across the community (this is being experienced across Leeton, Griffith and Coleambally).
- People feel low on resilience and it is leeching into mental health. We expect to see rise in suicide. Poor media coverage and misinformation is a big problem. The louder voices are often the most uninformed.
- In the Millennium drought many farmers turned to clubs and social networks to get through, it galvanised the community and there was hope. This time around leading farmers are less hopeful and thinking of leaving.
- Need to be realistic about the amount of water available into the future.
- Griffith was a shock absorber, but also showed that ability to rebound.
- There are ongoing struggles with housing supply and rental market, increase in FIFO workers – this is changing the economy (including how wealth generated in the region flows out of the region). The airport has enabled this and is a positive in some respects (i.e. good access to labour), but has also changed how the Griffith economy runs. Housing shortage is likewise also an opportunity. The demographics of the community are changing with decreasing levels of socio economic status
- There is a lag between the private sector and the public sector – the public sector reacts to the private sector changing (public sees what it is doing and tries to fill gaps). Griffith is on an upward trend but need the government funding to help fill gaps and push it forward.
- If you just mention the Basin Plan, people don't always understand. At some point we need to deal with the understanding and what it is all about. There are people on a huge spectrum of support to hatred. Right or wrong, this hits everyone's mindset and drives uncertainty. We need to address that to move forward (not for or against but just against being stuck with the status quo).
- some of the funds to upgrade infrastructure have been awesome (as an irrigator). It has improved the efficiency, but we have no water to use it.
- Better understanding what is influencing allocation would help.
- The WSP has made the allocation process more stable. Some really good bits in there that have brought stability (e.g. 5% on GS if HS wants to hit 100%).
- Murrumbidgee environmental assets fell undervalued, they are of importance to the community, e.g. for fishing.
- Some of the wetlands are definitely improving, but not sure the wider community really get it and we get shot down for publicising it. We aren't on the river so the benefits feel like someone else's.
- Negative perceptions are hard to overcome - cotton is hated, rice was hated etc. cities see us as environmental vandals. No one really cares if there are real environmental outcomes and don't really care if communities are decimated by this. Facts don't matter anymore, and it is just about getting the most emotive response and public opinion. We are better of putting our effort into delivery on ground. You



are not going to win the hearts of minds of people in the city, so just take it back to the community and push it on the ground.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What do you see as the main inhibitors or facilitators of positive change and why?*]

- National Farmers Federation have signed onto the \$100bn target (for agricultural production, this could be the starting point for a strategy).
- Perhaps we need a national conversation about water, environment, primary production and community (including First Nations) – If we don't have a sensible debate then we will always struggle and be in the same position.
- Everyone needs to be an ambassador for their community and be stronger on that – if we can win our own communities that would be huge.
- Leading infrastructure here, its world leading. Where government is undermining it that is an issue – we should better appreciate what we have (what we have is outstanding and let's not compromise it in anyway).
- The 40-50 year-old farmers were the innovators and that drives opportunities (if you want communities to fend for themselves – that is really important). They are the people that have had some success, have money and have the appetite to invest in the community.
- Attracting professional qualified people has always been a struggle (people don't always want to come). Just don't know how much the Basin Plan influenced that, but probably not much.
- Self-determination for communities is important and it is really important to create some more vision and direction (is what we are seeing what was intended?). We are drifting and don't have something to drive us forward – so we wanted to see communities grab hold of it and drive it forward.
- This Panel needs to be aware of the community impacts from water speculators.

[When asked: *What does 'success' for your community look like?*]

- Growing populations, healthy communities, economic diversity.
- Jobs – massive issues with youth unemployment but then we have unfilled jobs, why is there a gap there? People aren't always willing to do the jobs that are available.
- Export more commodities.
- Need to change the whole debate on the water and fiddling at the edges (we've measured and we need to correct). But where is the vision? At the political level, national and state level, there needs to be a vision and there needs to be more water.
- Supposed to be no change in underlying reliability – so if we see reliability drop (how're you going to fix that?). A simple form of success is to address reliability.



- People link water recovery to reliability which shows a misunderstanding.
- It took someone coming to this region with a vision here. People will take risks when they see opportunity and a vision. Vision needs to be joint – if government doesn't support then we just get what we have now, community shaking their fists.
- When government cuts the legs from under you, it's impossible to have a vision.
- A lot of young people (the future) are great, but worried that is starting to wane a little bit. They are less worried about producing and more looking into the trading.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- Market failure should be the threshold for government to get involved, we need to be clearer on that. That is government's role.
- Government can support the community in developing and pursuing a vision. It is inter-related, needs to be both community voice and government voice (has to be collaborative). Live in separate universes. Government doesn't speak to the trade-offs, just pretending everything is rosy doesn't work (we won't all survive as irrigation communities in this new world, and that is the elephant in the room).
- Giving power and voice back to community is good (it's a good principle), but fundamentally it is the production of economic wealth that will drive the community long term (needs to have the core of the economy – not an ancillary service driver).
- MDBP is complex and polarising, it needs changes but it is so vexed (so making substantive changes in the immediate term is probably not realistic). What would be brave is for government to subsidise regional communities to keep people out there.
- We need to think about what Basin Plan would be post 2024? (Need to adjust the numbers in a less contentious way). Turn the lever and say we need to do something, need to flex.
- Return the lower lakes to estuarine and return 2000GL.
- We need the 605GL offsets. Need to see them on the ground happening (or the Plan will unravel) – can't have buyback.
- Rigour around 450GL neutrality is very important. Have an agency in Canberra that will be very keen on projects, but need to stack up.



Key Messages from Coleambally Drop-In Session

12:30pm – 2:30pm, 30th September 2019, Coleambally Bowling and Community Club

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

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1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Survival mode: no one is looking forward and planning, we are in the thick of it – it's been like that for the last 15 of 17 years. The Basin Plan came at the worst time. However, we're probably way better off than other communities.
- External forces looking to get more environmental water and carryover not protected.
- The Basin Plan is exacerbating the severe drought.
- No one in government is standing up and representing the farmer and we are getting beaten by the press.
- Population has shrunk (Basin Plan was one driver) amongst others beyond our control, but there is just no support to assist.
- Impacts flow through agriculture related industries as well.
- Feel like we have worn all the costs / impacts of the Plan, but in some ways the irrigators are less impacted than the wider community (as they are often more able to adjust).
- Decline in small businesses, for example the newsagency is on the market and likely to shut in soon if no one purchases it.
- We don't see a future for our grandchildren. Kids are losing their sense of belonging (it's really hard / bad) and impacts on mental health.
- All the bad farmers / average farmers went in the Millennium drought – and also the older ones went as well (cashed out).



- If we get through this drought, we are better geared to come out of it ahead, but resilience is getting lower.
- Perversely, some of the most efficient farmers were the first to go this time around as they were the most debt leveraged and didn't get the water (so sold it off).

[When asked: *What makes your region or community different – what are the major strengths and opportunities, or challenges?*]

- Water is a key strength.
- Positive outlook – the people of this community will find a way forward (they'll find a way to get the last dollar out of everything).
- We've got a high-level resilience – it adapts, but feels like a death by a thousand cuts, and as the impacts get worse, the social and economic impacts multiply.
- We've got world class irrigation infrastructure – and got huge kicks from efficiency savings. We are a cooperative and have to keep efficiency savings. Coleambally funded it and got return back and that was a huge advantage.
- Geographically we are well placed for supply to markets and the climate which helps. Look at cotton – was picked up by innovative and strong farmers and we've built an industry for it. Capacity of the group to diversify.
- We have a fantastic group of third generation farmers; technologically savvy and professional. Noted that most attendees had their kids working on the farm with today.
- Transitioned rice mill is a good sign – shows confidence in the community. Employment and opportunity is still strong, cotton gin sitting ready to go when the water comes.
- Compliance and regulations can be an inhibitor, (short-fresh compliance is a challenge, growing olives etc.).
- Feel misinformation is really harming our mental views, it is feeding negative outlooks and reducing resilience. It is a huge problem; we can't get trustworthy and transparent information on anything.
- Not capturing enough water – lots of floods that we can't benefit from.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What do you see as the main inhibitors or facilitators of positive change and why?*]

- Regulation for Murrumbidgee Irrigation expansion, it was huge, but they need more water (they've just expanded but we don't have the water for it. Where is the entitlement to support that?).
- Lots of nuts going in which is driving demand, when allocation is low they swallow all the available water.
- Rain!



- Not many permanent plantings in Coleambally, this could diversify the sector.
- Can't have wholesale irrigation development at the same time that existing irrigation zones are trying to survive. Feel like the irrigation corps are favouring wholesale development.
- Stranded assets are a risk.
- Greenfield is happening without checks and balances on third party impacts – just make it go through a really tight process first.
- Need to maintain the value of production and look at value-add.

[When asked: *What does 'success' for your community look like?*]

- Strengthening or certainty around general security. Even more certainty around a lower allocation would make it easier to plan.
- Having enough quality school teachers, medical care, and social services. Those will be the first things that we will lose, and we can't get the staff that we need.
- Locally owned businesses, doesn't need to be big business (make them more accountable) – local ownership and investment. Having that shows the community that people are committed.
- Water is what we need, and we need government to support this.
- Triggers that cost the government (so that they are motivated) – e.g. if you are under 15% allocation then government pays.
- Changes to carryover are important and change the way we plan.
- Increase Dam storages, water conservation infrastructure (to get rid of the variability). It won't stack up as an economic model to do it, but it needs to be done.
- Clarence river scheme, 16 million ML on Clarence river, put it through the mountains and run it down the Darling. Then it frees up our rivers from having to deliver to SA. No major dams since 1986 for a Dam – it's about time.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- Lock the numbers in the Basin Plan and don't change them and get on with the job – provides certainty and we can move forward. Government changes policy all the time and it is just inconsistent. Frustrated about moving goal posts in terms of rules and regulations. Locking in the MDBP rules and components and living with it would be a good outcome. The biggest risk we face is to throw it all out.
- Enforce the regulations that exist at the moment
- Need a royal commission into Basin Plan.
- Opportunity for targeted grant funding for community groups – need a hand up in these tough times.



- A lot of government services are linked to the population and you should invest in that. E.g. we all have to go to Wagga Wagga for hospital treatment. It lifts the whole community when these things are local.
- There is no long-term plan for the country – it's just elections – we spend heaps on roads around cities, but nothing out in the regions. Need a national enduring strategy for regional Australia.
- We need to support our kids – after they have left school, the cost of education can be hard to bear (for the kids who need to leave their communities for education). Farm assets exclude us from opportunities (means testing)
- Information: where do people go to understand the Water Act, the Basin Plan, Water Sharing Plans? It can be hard to find answers.



Key Messages from Deniliquin Roundtable Session 1

5pm – 7pm, 30th September 2019, Deniliquin RSL

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

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1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- With low allocation and high prices, people have stopped growing and there are so many unknowns, people have lost a lot of confidence.
- Spent a lot of time investing in land and water over the last few years and transitioned to cotton. Price was ok at the time, but fluctuates.
- Some businesses have benefited from water efficiency programs (e.g. earth-moving), but that is declining now.
- We are 2-3 months past the window where things could have been workable for the next year (i.e. even if it rains now, next year will still be a struggle).
- Some are now more or less locked out a lot of rice, and focusing on more opportunistic irrigation now.
- Challenges in the agriculture sector are then having flow on impacts to communities (less money coming in, more negative outlook).
- There were land and management plans 20 years ago that focused on infrastructure, but a lot of the irrigation infrastructure is now sitting idle and there isn't a clear plan for the future.
- It's really hard for young people to come back and farm, it is hard to have land and also water.
- Lots of great farm layout but just the water isn't there (at the right price now).
- This community probably isn't really in the position to have a hard conversation about whether there is a future for an intensive irrigation industry, but maybe it



should. Maybe it is a transition to dryland or some other transition, but either way the answer has to come from us (noting it is also pushed by market forces).

- Throughput to the community has reduced and probably won't be as much into the future which will impact businesses in town. Heaps of people are leaving to get apprenticeships and opportunities in other communities (e.g. going from Berrigan to Cobram for work).
- Most irrigation businesses are looking for affordable water and it is unclear if water is going to highest value use. Older people want to see it in the valley but it is also an asset that can support their retirement. There is no real tagging of water so it is hard to follow where water is going.
- Moving goal posts also making it difficult, if MDBA really ruled it and had a strong presence that might be better.
- Would be disappointed if we just shifted to dryland cropping (millions have been spent on infrastructure for this) – it's just how do you get cheap water to take advantage of it?
- Water dominates every discussion in the community and everyone is really on edge (in terms of finances and staying afloat). It is often the town people who bring up the issue – they sense it and feel the impacts as well.
- Land prices and water prices are going to stay strong, but the other businesses will feel the impacts more, so in some ways they are more vulnerable.
- In the Millennium drought there was a better mentality, it is more of an issue now, people are down and don't see a way forward.
- We have all the politicians in our backyard, but haven't heard anything positive at that level. They are playing the politics not serving the people.
- There is an issue with misinformation and leadership:
 - Negative views dominate and there is a lot of hearsay, people get on twitter and spread misinformation or we end up relying on organisation that are driving a specific agenda.
 - Anyone nowadays can tweet or share something and it becomes fact – people make decisions based on this stuff and it is wrong
- Sometimes social media is really positive for the community, but often it isn't and it is better to shut off.

[When asked: *What makes your region or community different – what are the major strengths and opportunities, or challenges?*]

- Tourism is good – more opportunities for that.
- The younger generation is a strength, there are young people coming back and making a go of it. Our human and social capital is a real strength. Sense of community is a real drawcard. We have all been away and then come back.
- We have some of the most critical infrastructure – it is really a strength.



- We have kind of set ourselves as the bottom feeders / it has made us less viable (went down the opportunistic route, instead of going down the permanent plantings to sustain the throughput for the community). This makes it challenging.
- We have good infrastructure, weather, soils, and proximate to transport routes.
- Carryover is starting to dictate early allocation announcements (and playing into the hand of the bigger players). We need a facility for earlier allocation announcements.
- Boom and bust – lots of people are just saying we'll gear up when we get more water. People worried about how carryover is influencing this. Probably need to look at the rules (it's not just what has been taken out, but also how it is managed), and feels like a lot of these factors are conspiring against this region.
- On-farm water should also be considered for environmental benefits (and the environment on farms are suffering significantly with less water). Landcare has also been significantly reduced.
- Tourism is huge – can rent your house out, it's huge in some areas (seeing immense benefits from the river), however Deni doesn't benefit as much as others like Echuca.
- How can they be flooding the river when we have 0% allocation. The environmental water holders need to be more vocal on what is happening.
- People in the cities assume that the river is empty (on the Darling) – but its full. People need a bulletin on what is going down the river. There is a difference between liking what we are hearing, vs. just having good information (and would just like the latter).
- Community has been active in Jerilderie and Berrigan have been really good in getting grants and this can be galvanising for the community. But sometimes the grants just go backwards – we had a bunch of investments in sports and stuff it just didn't work.
- Local government is really different due to council amalgamation – no one buys here because of the new council rules.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What do you see as the main inhibitors or facilitators of positive change and why?*]

- Horticulture is a good value add opportunity
- Some more scoping and coordinated pushing of what to do (i.e. figuring it out at a higher level so we have a vision).
- Local council could attract more small businesses through incentives
- Need to secure high security. If you have an agricultural idea, it means you need water.
- People don't have the confidence to invest in water related investments, but there are still thriving business outside of agriculture (has to be outside of agriculture to be attractive now).
- Health care – and social services are the big employers. All these support services are big employers (if you take that out of the equation it is pretty scary).



- A lot of towns are very generational with the soldier settlement (i.e. homogenous age groups). So, going forward it will change a bit (but it's not quite there yet).
- Having the TAFE now is great, it has got that critical mass.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- Knowledge over hearsay is important.
- It's our responsibility to take this region forward, and government shouldn't block us and could ease the pathway. An independent body putting a 50-year plan in place for this region could help.
- Carryover and allocations need to fluctuate less. Want government to step in and shape some rules to level it out more.
- Need an educational and advertising campaign to promote agriculture, the cities think we are environmental vandals.
- Knowledge and perceptions are terrible – broader urban community can't stop trying to help, but also can't fathom why we grow cotton. There is no coherent narrative.

Potentially short-term actions could include:

- Support and certainty from government – a positive statement would be good. Otherwise everyone just feels like collateral.
- Would like to look into how the system works and rules – would be really useful to improve understanding (and maybe setting minimums).
- Government grants to industry groups to promote Australian grown products is key (look at Sunrice).
- There is room for more research, development and extension, particular for a lower water future.
- Need a more productive relationship with government and politicians to drive better outcomes
- Better information on allocations (in real time), rules, management and markets would be useful.



Key Messages from Deniliquin Roundtable Session 2

9am – 11am, 1st October 2019, Deniliquin RSL

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

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1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- There is no confidence that anything will actually change even with these reports. If the reports find issues but the Minister still stands behind the plan, what is this going to deliver? We need restoration of faith in the government. Our communities are confident that their voices won't be heard.
- Things are worse than we thought and it will get even worse. The second half of the Plan will be much harder than the first. There is no health and prosperity.
- People don't see much of a future here and that is clear.
- The drought highlights the failures of the policy. Our systems were built to withstand drought but we haven't been able to. If we have catastrophic flooding but only have 53% allocation, this has nothing to do with the drought.
- We want to see environmental representation as well.
- Economic planning has to go beyond 24 months – nothing is sustainable right now.
- Need better management of the river - running the river much higher now compared to previously (in terms of conveyance). Pushing more water through the system. The rules aren't fit for purpose.
- Our society is suffering, just look at trends in social data – we are losing social capital. Inter-generational disadvantage didn't used to be an issue but it is getting worse. Finley and Berrigan went from above 7th decile to 3rd decile of disadvantage – that is purely attributable to change in those locations.
- First Nations communities are suffering, and it is getting worse. Average age is 19-21, unemployment is higher, life expectancy lower etc.



- The number of businesses is not a good metric (lose a rice mill and gain two one-man bands, it's not balancing out).
- Berrigan – we have 4 distinct communities, supply chains all go south, Shepparton is further south. The Southern Basin has a border, and we don't appear in modelling and the analysis (we kind of get lost).
- There changes in our community do not balance the losses we have suffered - we have growth in Tocumwal and Barooga (more people coming in from 55-85 because of affordability and more families), from tourism and lifestyle and environmental values, but there is low income (from casual work) so it does not make up for the agricultural loss.
- Basin Plan has driven changed investment decision (lack of), and there is poor government investment (not connected to a regional centre). Funding models are spread too thinly.
- There is no support for the community which affects our ability to generate wealth. Inter-reach spread across too much – demand for services is outstripping supply and we get no funding to service places like Balranald.
- Immigration isn't a decision made to create wealth, but last resort. Lots of people moving for low cost housing. People are coming in with very high needs.
- There is a huge opportunity for low socio-economic groups if we can get those entry level jobs but those jobs aren't there.
- Seasonal industry means there are high numbers of casual roles which doesn't support the economy.
- We feel like there is a lack of compassion from government.

[When asked: *Looking back, what have been the major trends and drivers impacting your community, and how do you view these looking forward?*]

- Huge mental health issue (as a secondary impact of other drivers) – it is not being addressed sufficiently. People genuinely see suicide as an option/possible outcome.
- Regulatory impact statement from MDBA in 2012 was incorrect, we need to revisit that RIS.
- Do not make a recommendation for a structural adjustment package – that is a tick and flick package. It's a band-aid, we won't take it.
- People need to be aware of risk from SDLAM projects – will close down Yanco creek.
- 458GL NSW to SA (under SDL) we are wearing all of that risk in NSW Murray.
- Per capita return for Berrigan and Finley recovery is huge, and we don't even appear on the mapping.
- Macro-changes are massive and will continue. We've seen breakdown of statutory marketing authorities, massive innovation and automation, struggle for small communities (structural changes). It is hard to disseminate between bad water reform policy and economic shifts.
- Policy/reform hasn't resulted in fair distribution.



- Politicians keep making excuses rather than recognising and addressing the problem. People are really downcast after meetings (e.g. NSW Farmers Meeting) because we voice our opinions but the politicians don't listen. The government has a centralised mindset and are disconnected to the region.
- Where is the state government in all this? They can't minimise the impact of water reform, but they can help through other channels – we need more from state on this. They are derelict in their duty.
- After the Millennium Drought – there was hope. We got through it and opened the door but issue is now there is nothing when you open the door.
- Economically we are tied to Victoria – worth noting. The big dairy processors are falling out of favour and there is a real dynamic change in the processing sector and where farmers are sending their milk. Still, dairy farms are changing farming systems and others are exiting.
- We just need some certainty – can they give us a vision on where they want us to be.
- Less reliable, less secure water, but milk production really hasn't dropped compared to Vic (so we are adapting).
- We have a lack of RnD and a lack of innovation in Dairy (it hasn't kept pace with innovation in other sectors)
- We need to know the scenario regarding the future of water – are we pulling through or looking at long-term adaptation to less water? Murray Irrigation has always been GS and carryover – if it is a down-cycle and we come out, it is ok. But, if it is long term drying trend the world has to change. It's not just about less water, there is inequitable access to water.
- We don't think you can separate the role of this committee from the plan.
- Multi-nationals are coming in and that is both positive and negative.
- Not a single strategic planning document that looks at the vision for irrigation as an industry – so how can communities have any confidence.
- All the intellectual power has been lost. Reform was probably needed but no one can agree on things so there is an inability to change.
- Some transition in South Australia where FN is now the biggest employer in the community. There is a desire to be involved in economic development. Still see some hope in communities – despite all of this. FN interest in land will grow in coming years, but we probably aren't ready for that.
- The environment is a political tool – if they were genuine it wouldn't be remote decision-making but local knowledge and less ideologically driven.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What do you see as the main inhibitors or facilitators of positive change and why?*]

- Proximity to market, climate and freight is a positive.
- We have great infrastructure and investment – irrigation and non-irrigation.



- Farm scale is suitable (not challenge of smaller farms).
- We have had a lack of local knowledge in the process.
- We are doubling our efficiency but it still isn't enough - can now grow twice as much fodder on the same amount of water – we have tapped out on this model. We are putting cutting edge systems into the not viable basket.
- Banks now view this region as high risk – and won't invest. (Access to credit is drying up).
- There is a disbelief in government, think this area has high FMDs but it is one of the lowest.
- Indigenous grains project – crop diversification (low water crops) which can sustain populations without irrigation. Can really improve health and mental health through traditional foods.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- If there is a contamination off river it can be dealt with which is a major advantage. And it is modernised.
- Need to ask whether communities become forces in their own right without agriculture.
- Need RnD to support – more help on the tools and levers is important. Contribute levies and stuff, but we don't see a lot coming back. Need development.
- Local development, extension and water services had a really strong presence before and that had immense value for social capital.
- Metro-centric snobbery, people de-value our experience. We are savvy and there is poor market intelligence.
- Human centred design, and co-design with communities is really important.
- We are constantly adapting and resilient – but we have limited ability to bounce back from the social or political change to the environment. Need very localised discussions to inform solutions. Needs to be political not pragmatic.
- Structural adjustment programs will not work. Governments have tried multiple things (abattoirs, energy, SA packages) but agriculture is the number one driver of this economy.
- We need to look after the environment – river ecology and the health of the environment impacts us socially and economically. The river is dying, the forests are dying (flows are too high). None of this makes sense – the Plan is destroying natural RAMSAR sites, and the on-farm environments are dying.
- There are concerns about the timing and process of the report and outcomes/responses.



Key Messages from Hay Drop-In Session

1pm – 3pm, 1st October 2019, Hay Services Club

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated, and no attempt has been made to verify information or resolve conflicting information provided by stakeholders.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Hay is on the edge of a precipice. Hardest and fastest we have ever dried out. Extremely challenging as to how you run a business in these conditions, with a complete change in seasons, it is hard to see life on the land.
- Lots of amalgamation (reduction in families). The National Parks and Cotton industry has helped put an economic floor in for Hay, but with the drought, it will be catastrophic to not have water for irrigators and graziers.
- When water was attached to land, this drought proofed land. We separated and lost control of our asset. All of this country was developed for irrigation in the past, but we have lost the ability to keep doing that.
- When we raise issues about water or environment it ends up in the 'too hard' basket and water reform discussions can be fairly divisive to discuss. Concerns around the transparency of irrigation infrastructure program (transparency and delivery) are also present. However, in town there is less interest in water reform as driver of change.
- Social and economic conditions in town are probably declining to an extent, however, cotton has provided a lot of jobs (were previously rice and wool).
- Water is so valuable that it is just flick passed to anyone who will pay more. Once the price reaches \$200/ML then no one is making money.
- Impacts of the drought is being made worse by no one growing any hay and lots of jobs are going (agronomists leaving, farmers selling out) which is reducing the ability of farmers to get good advice and adapt.



- There are also concerns about losing young people, and agriculture not viewed as a viable / worthwhile industry.
- There is a need to promote resilience and adaption more, leadership in this is important.
- Foreign labour is coming in to other areas because people aren't wanting to stay in the region in some areas, however this is probably happening to a lesser extent in Hay.

[When asked: *What makes your region or community different – what are the major strengths and opportunities, or challenges?*]

- Hay is a great town, low crime and social capital, there is tourism (Council is targeting campervans / road-trippers) and the isolation can be an asset (as well as a constraint).
- There is a pretty good engineering sector servicing the agriculture sector which has benefits from water reform and investment.
- 'Can do' attitude in Hay – people say its clean and friendly. There a good volunteering rates – have had more people volunteering, social media has been good in getting people to help out with the community. It feels like there is some (unspoken) galvanisation in the face of adversity.
- At the same time, Hay has also lost Rotary, Apex and Lions (all prior to this drought). It is also a concern that we have a big generation gap – (60+ or 30s and below). There was some hollowing out due to the Millennium drought.
- We've gone from decades of really good seasons and strong allocation, to droughts, expensive water and allocation.
- Challenges – just keeping the population here (e.g. farm labourers). All the government services have been spread-out, just not here and it feels like the community has to fight for everything to come to Hay.
- Water trading is also shifting wealth out of our town – this has changed the relationship between water, wealth and community.
- For the corporates, all the inputs are tendered at a national level and brought in – so it is changing things quite a lot for local suppliers.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What does success look like in your community?*]

- Survival of the community.
- Families in the region.
- Water and land recombined.
- No empty shop fronts.
- Money flowing in not out.



- Population growth to support breadth of services.
- Industry diversification to take advantage of regional strengths
- Hay based on a prosperous agricultural industry and a growing prosperous tourism industry. The real basis of Hay is the agricultural industry.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- Perhaps all the towns need to reassess their roles? (Irrigation might not be their prime purpose). Environment is really important, but balance isn't there – and also third-party environmental impacts from reform should be considered.
- Water rules between the states should be changed for the better, it is inequitable.
- Telecommunications – NBN went to all Australians (they made a strong commitment on that), so can government make similar commitments on education and health?
- All the policy is interventionist now – too many policies and regulations.
- Government needs to listen. People are telling the government it isn't working and they need to work more on how to fix it and there is not much confidence in government to improve things.
- We're basically bound by constitution and federation (makes it very hard) and the states have vested interests when it comes to water.
- Lack of knowledge is a huge issue. Education and understanding of water and water reform is poor. We don't sell the environmental benefits and it just adds to the angst of what is going on, people also don't appreciate the extent of drought and the relationship with water allocation and availability.
- More respect for local knowledge – it gets disregarded, particularly for environmental water.
- Damage at weirs and erosion from big changes in flow (fluctuations) – just mismanagement, not really environmental flows.
- Distrust in allocation and management of water – disheartened over arguments and fighting amongst interests.
- The 'City' has a bad view of the sector from programs like 4 Corners, changing this perception is important.



Key Messages from Balranald Drop-In Session

5pm – 7pm, 1st October 2019, Balranald Senior Citizens Club

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- It feels like no one cares about our community and just wants us to disappear. It is all agriculture second and environment first – it needs to be the other way around.
- There are too many people taking water off the market – almond growers, multi-nationals etc. are putting it out of reach for everyone else – this means we can't compete with our farming practices in our region.
- People are speculating on the market and almond growers are the only ones who can afford temporary water.
- There is a lot of water going down the Murray which is hard to reconcile when there is low general security allocation in our region. This water is used for flooding the environment or going to South Australia or almonds. Emotionally, it is frustrating for us.
- At current water prices, we can't even grow fodder or side crops to tide us over – there's no allocation and the temporary price is too high.
- The community is tied to water and has a long history with water and resource management but feels unheard and overlooked by decision-makers and policy decisions. Have made countless submissions, letters and speeches which aren't reflected in decision-making and policies. There has been a lot of expenditure and resources to MDBA and other parts of government, but we do not see the results or benefits from this.
- Quality of water for potable use is sometimes an issue, gradually getting worse and worse.



- Overall the Community isn't as bad as some others and still has some hope.
- During the Millennium Drought it was easier to accept because Hume was 9% so it was clear there was no water, but Hume was full in 2016 and now it is 6% allocation – that does not make sense to us.
- This environmental water isn't well explained. There needs to be more accountability, information and justification for environmental water.
- General Security irrigators are wearing the impacts of water from water moving downstream.
- Misinformation is an issue, it's hard to know fact from fiction and a lot of information gets circulated through the community that is hard to verify – but it informs peoples' understanding and decisions. Information justifying the use of water would be insightful, e.g. what water is flowing down the river?
- If the Minister is not going to move on the Basin Plan there is no point in doing this work because people will not be here in a few years' time.
- De-slug the river, de-silt the river and maintain it. The health of the river is poor and more water into recreation would be beneficial – particularly as a refuge when it is dry. This would help morale.
- We have barely any mental health services – people are mentally defeated and we just don't do anything at the moment.
- The challenge is that what might help me, might not help you – so how do we know where to go with our decisions. At the end of the day, we have one thing in common – we all want more water. General security allocation used to be around ~75%, however from 2004-2016 it is more like ~55%. Climate change is driving a lot of this, and dams aren't going to do anything when there is no water flowing in.

[When asked: *What makes your region or community different – what are the major strengths and opportunities, or challenges?*]

- Diverse agriculture, would be worse off if we didn't have a good mix.
- The river is a major asset, that is why we live here for production and recreation.
- Good soil types.
- Location on the Sturt Highway (major transport route).
- Tourism has some positives but hasn't eventuated as significantly as hoped (certainly not filling the void).
- Solar farms are coming to the region, but these don't bring the same wealth into the region as other sectors (and potential risks of creating heat bubbles)
- Almond farming is filling out the hotels in town, so that is helping the economy.
- Massive foreign development is also occurring which is both a challenge and an opportunity. Corporates are a big threat to community – they don't contribute to the community and strangle the family farm.
- Cleanliness of agricultural production– don't have big risk of chemicals.



- The government is stopping us as well, all the minority parties are running the country and there are more votes in the city.
- The community lost distance education and there have been significant regional declines / industries declining.
- Government is paying attention to climate change; people need to know the risks and it undermines business and no one is addressing this. Lots of people point to water recovery, it's the low rainfall that is reducing social conditions and reducing water availability.
- Solar is going up in prime agricultural land, we aren't valuing our soil types – solar should go in the areas with poor soil types.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What does 'success' for your community look like?*]

- Success is how we find a better balance between environment and water, and other water users.
- Improved water quality, the water was clear and the reeds were in, carp and mismanagement have made it worse.
- The community had a mental health night where about 50 people came, 10% signed up for immediate support and the next event attracted 150 people. This was a really big event and a great initiative, that support is needed.
- It is hard to think about the future and success at this point in time, but there needs to be hope and a sense that the community can pull through.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- More water should be at the core of any solutions:
 - More extreme events could mean more water could be captured (in extreme events).
 - Consider pumping desalinated water to the river.
 - The Clarence river is wasted out to sea.
- Local advisory committee got dropped but more local knowledge is needed.
- Better information, transparency and accountability for river management and environmental water (lots of confusion and misinformation on these topics).
- More clarity and certainty on water management, reform and availability.
- A stronger voice for agriculture and regional communities, particularly with regard to the current extreme conditions.
- Better planning and coordination across water and land management.



Key Messages from Swan Hill Roundtable Session

9:30am – 11:30am, 2nd October 2019, Swan Hill Town Hall

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Concerned about the community – there is a lot of misunderstanding, confusion, blaming.
- There are good things coming out of water reform, but most are viewed as negative (and we don't talk about the positives). Wish there was more discussion on the positives.
- More standardising of systems across the Basin would be good – plug up the holes first then talk about what is next. At the moment, we're analysing the impacts when we haven't finished the plan.
- Census data is incorrect – \$1.2bn in production of almonds is low in comparison.
- Unemployment is really low and there are lots of undocumented workers.
- Flow of money isn't coming back into the community (particularly with corporates). We're producing more but it doesn't stay in the community. The economic conditions seem good but we don't seem to experience the wealth in this region.
- Macroeconomic changes are also hitting us – land used to be the major asset but now it is more water. Farmers are becoming the more silent traders rather than producers. Drought is hitting small discretionary businesses e.g. cafes, retail. Other businesses are also changing e.g. earth movies, small agriculture service providers.
- Our economy is buoyant and significantly diverse. We have a strong industrial sector that has grown significantly, and strong manufacturing from local businesses (selling industrial into Perth and Darwin). There are tough circumstances but we are in a position to pull through.



- The economy (including agriculture services, retail, and other businesses) seems very reliant on water.
- Steel dealers, car dealers, and utilities are good measures of the community.
- Lots of local shops closing doors on the main street. We are aware this is an issue we can't control and that it's happening all around e.g. Melbourne.
- Nature of ownership is changing – more corporatisation and less local ownership/family farming, although big developments still create employment.
- Losing recreational use and amenities from degraded waterways which is making things worse.
- People struggled but bounced back from the Millennium drought but are concerned about our ability to bounce back this time. We really want compliance and telemetry across the system (feels like we have an accounting problem).
- Environmental flows could help the visitor economy. If there was some coordination, it would make it easier.
- A lot of people using low interest rates to take some risks, but this is stopping discretionary spending.
- Trade has not benefitted First Nations and is vulnerable for people who don't own water or land.
- There is a fair bit of development around Toolebuc but this hasn't extended to the school.
- Young people not really seeing a future here – going to university when they could be doing vocational training and working in the region.
- A number of other social issues separate from water reform that we are dealing with e.g. domestic violence, low income.

[When asked: *What makes your region or community different – what are the major strengths and opportunities, or challenges?*]

- We have been able to effectively manage water in a way that works for us. We took the opportunity to strategically sell GS and buy HS.
- We don't think that water reform will be a huge driver of change/prosperity. Think that we need management of drought.
- One challenge is retaining the younger generation – there are a lot of smart kids but they go for upper level jobs and don't want to come back.
- Unequal economic distribution e.g. Swan Hill gets shopping from Robinvale so that our own shopping strip is dying.
- Ownership is an issue and speculators are driving that.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What does 'success' for your community look like?*]



- More cooperation with environmental water holders and Swan Hill. Blue-green algae outbreak would be bad for our economy and general economy especially because people come to the area for the river (recreational use, culture, leisure). Water quality is critical but often overlooked.
- Better focus on the recreational aspect of the river.
- Stormwater inflows are ruining the quality of the water – we need to consider this.
- Have corporations reinvest in the region.
- Huge housing shortage at entry level in the market but building houses is not enough because people are here to earn a wage and send home as much as possible. We want to put undocumented or visa workers on a pathway to permanent residences, and even converted to citizens to bring their families here (about 10,000 hidden worked which is a third of the population). There are also rezoning issues to get new housing (but stuck at state level).
- Confidence and security is key. We don't want to make rules and caps that will undermine the whole market and cause big businesses to leave.
- Fishing is at risk – it is the number one river activity. The government has put in millions for infrastructure to save water but this risks the fishing industry. Sizes of big cod are decreasing (being caught at 1.4m). Water environment is not suitable for the fish (e.g. water temperature unsuitable) and there is a lot of erosion.
- Water is recovered within a regulated system. The community doesn't really know how to have an input into environmental watering.
- We need a way to attract people in, not just keep people from leaving.
- There is a lot of misinformation online that needs to be dealt with.
- There is huge potential for leadership in the town which can encourage advocacy (e.g. for workers and supermarkets), community leadership programs, development of young leaders (e.g. in footy clubs).
- Healthy community needs a healthy river.
- Want a platform for our voice to be heard – withdrew from Murray-Darling Association because our concerns were not heard. We have local government from Eyre Peninsula but we don't feel represented.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- The irrigation industry is being compensated which is good as agriculture is important and drives social wellbeing, but we need to support other areas and other opportunities to build resilience.
- Our community is made up of a lot of different views and the diverse economy makes it challenging to help everyone have a positive outcome (someone has a good day while another loses their job). Small business and industries that aren't keeping up can be very negative and a lot of people complain to those in council. Need more support and more opportunities.



Key Messages from Wakool Roundtable Session 1

1pm – 3pm, 2nd October 2019, Wakool and District Services Memorial Sports Club

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Wakool township is suffering. Not enough young people. We've lost the local football team (not enough young people to field a team). Next generation of farmers at risk. Only 10-12 kids across two schools. There is decline everywhere.
- We never used to worry about water but now it is everything. Wakool has lost 73% loss of jobs. We lost water – we have a lot of good farming assets but we just don't have water.
- There is little faith that any real change will be delivered. We had these community profiles in 2016 – what more do we need to prove that it is broken? No confidence in the government – lack of political will to address issues which are so obvious. Fundamental issues have not even been touted for change.
- Water market and the capitalisation hasn't played out as we anticipated and that has had huge environmental consequences (e.g. water is now being pumped down the river not upstream). Heading back to pre-irrigation management (dryland) – if that is the case government should be upfront and compensate.
- The government imposing 450 and 605 – without really considering the social and economic impacts. Don't think that this is in the national interest (it is driving structural adjustment – the Plan is driving a structural adjustment).
- We don't have any clear strategies or vision for regional Australia / agriculture. We added in the free market and de-regulation without a vision or direction for the future. We don't have a strategy for feeding Australians or for irrigated agriculture.



- There is a false perception that Moama is thriving – in reality there is agricultural hardship and mental health issues. Increasing frustrations in delivering services in regional areas (with growing demand). Seeing depression and anxiety, as well as a lot of anger and frustration is really scary. People feel so angry and impotent with regard to what they are facing. Anger is directed at the three things – SA water, Trading, Darling (and within that E-water). There is a drug and alcohol problem – thought it was a town issue but it is increasingly coming from rural areas.
- Environmental impacts are a huge concern. Evaporations losses are significant. Fire – they made a disaster by taking logging out of the environment. Higher intensity.
- Conversion of the red gums into National Parks had a significant impact through reducing farm income (so people didn't have a back-up with firewood).
- Some things are masking the real issues. If you use ABARES information it doesn't show up because people are actually selling everything off (the decline will be abrupt after that). Stock selling has been reasonable (so masking further).
- We've lost investors to other regions, it's too risky and too hard to be guaranteed in this region. Need to bring those companies back up the river (and MIL couldn't get the water there easily).
- We have good infrastructure and arrangements, innovation across the community/industry, and are well located for transport, but we are not seeing prosperity.
- Need to deal with conveyance loss and restrict trade down the river. Not just about water allocations.
- Need to recognise that things are different and adapt to that. We've got a changed setting, with less flooding and more carbon and then we flush it etc. It is a very different equation to what it was before. We've only had two floodplain events (worst condition in the Basin) – two events, will flood about 10% this year.
- The environmental water isn't helping our natural environment (it is all the way down the river). The benefit from the environmental water is justifying the impacts on up.
- Recreational fishing is of significant value.
- Rice industry is about to fold. Reduced jobs. GS has gone from 80% to 53% (huge hit) – we just grow rice on a pulse.
- Concerns that the data doesn't in anyway match the experience at a localised scale.

[When asked: *How do you believe water management and reform has changed your community? If so, can you describe how?*]

- We are failing to live up to the objectives of the Basin plan. It's running the river too high – planning is going on unabated. Think it is all a symptom of a bad Basin Plan.
- Reform/Plan has no ability to adapt to changes. So many things have really changed that the Plan becomes dated and at the political level there is a paralysis to change things.



- The Basin Plan / Water Act objectives should have enough flexibility to support changes to free up more water but we have gotten nothing – rule changes have absolutely tied up this region.
- Businesses getting paid to upgrade infrastructure, and then just buying water out of the industry. It has become a rort. The way this system works means we have been disadvantaged the most.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What does 'success' for your community look like?*]

- Would like to attract investment upstream – need some complementary and intensive industry.
- Predictability of supply must be there (reliability) – even if it is less than what we will need in the future
- Equity – across the states and territories, standardisation across the states.
- Need regulation on the water markets – it will drive the value of water down. Let's be proactive – need some zones and regulation (don't want to trade it all to the bottom). We are going against the objectives of the Plan and want to push some water back to this region. Need security and reliability of water.
- Review the rules in the context of a strategy or vision for Australia and review of water sharing arrangements – how can you do that without looking at new development and planning.
- Going back to more reliable GS – the government should get the policy right on this.
- Successful communities will be the ones with access to water, as well as some diversity in the community (we can't just go back to relying on the ups and downs of water availability and farming).
- Environmental water – would like to see it be more accounted for. Transparency and accountability. Want their water use managed and reported.
- Success ultimately comes from the community.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- Keen to see this as an all over government issue (it needs to be federal but also states (and below)).
- We need a more concerted RnD, extension and government support for farming communities as well. Think we have probably over de-regulated.
- People want to know what government really think. People think if you have the political backing in some areas, you can do whatever you want (if you don't have a foot-hold in the political system then you get left behind).



- Would like to see a properly supported innovation hub to explore how best to use our scarce resource.
- We can be successful with funding but need to recognise that it isn't going to solve everything. We have dropped off on the SEIFA index – but we've already gone from 7 down to 1 or 2. Where is the capacity to rebound?
- Funding through MDBA economic development program – one of the biggest issues is getting the expertise.
- We need a degree of trust – we aren't here to misrepresent.



Key Messages from Wakool Roundtable Session 2

3:30pm – 5:30pm, 2nd October 2019, Wakool and District Services Memorial Sports Club

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

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1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Feeling hurt, uncertain and confused – there are a number of facets and we are seeing a bit of a perfect storm. Environment, operator not working with other holders, dry cycle and market movements.
- There isn't an alignment with the environment and the operator. We're sitting on so much water, why can't it go to the consumptive user?
- We spent \$268,000 less on contractors and inputs to our local community.
- There are environmental benefits from agriculture and we don't get any recognition of that. Think the value of agriculture to environment is under done.
- Mental health issues are significant. We have a weekly service that's new, but they're fully booked and oversubscribed. Lots of people on a waiting list. People becoming more certain that they won't have any crop – starting to hit home at this time of year. There were a series of drought response announcements but a lot of these services don't get back to the farm.
- There was some optimism and opportunity in water reform in the Millennium Drought – there was a lot of stuff there. The on-farm efficiency grants created some more optimism. Trade was really good for us, even in the drought. But it's different with water going below the choke. Water hit \$1100 ML in Millennium Drought – everyone knew there was a drought, but this feels more like a price hike.
- There is a lack of a master plan/vision. Government spends money but it is never a coherent or strategic approach. Government too focused on 'the future is in your hands' approach – what does this place look like without a vision?



- Many people leave home because there is no employment for them here and businesses are shutting down – we've lost banks, machinery dealerships have shut.
- Difficulty keeping the next generation. Parents don't see opportunities for their children so they don't encourage them to stay. There isn't a big social life (used to be bigger). Our footy and netball club is doing better than others but concerned that we will lose that.
- A lot of recreational activities that build community depend on water (e.g. fishing, golf clubs, skiing on the lake). Green space and lakes are important to social infrastructure.
- Heavy black flat grounds that support rice if you have water and support the environment – that is a huge strength. Dryland practices are harder on our land / soil types (especially west of Deni).
- Telecommunications is pretty poor. We can't access opportunities as a result. Sometimes you miss out on water because you can't connect. We can't get phone service at the fire station. The landline is that bad and half the time it doesn't work,
- Don't have that much corporate agriculture in the region.
- Negative leadership is really bad. Farming core groups have let us down. There is a lot of anger and despair and hitting back. We need to start again on leadership and a better vision (beyond being prosperous and successful).
- Advocacy has been a big factor (driving political outcomes) – but we don't really have a centre of excellence.
- Inability to generate wealth at present.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What do you see as the main inhibitors or facilitators of positive change and why?* / What does 'success' for your community look like?]

- Disconnect with what is going on in the environment and what we are experiencing/getting access to.
- Need to address the issue of conveyance - conveyance bucket needs to be filled before you can get to GS.
- We need a more cohesive/detailed vision and master plan and the government has to support this. A lot of people want things to stop and go back to how they were – they can't see what different success looks like. We need a better vision so that people can see that there can be success even in a different environment.
- We need to create/sustain more opportunities in schools, employment, and socially to keep the future generation here. This will provide future leadership as well.
- Need to consider commodity prices and transport access.
- We need more and better advocacy to get the message to politicians and encourage change.



Key Messages from Finley Roundtable Session

9:30am – 11:30am, 3rd October 2019, Finley RSL

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Lower confidence, a feeling of abandonment (people aren't listening to us), wellbeing and mental health issues, issue of inequity.
- There is no irrigation strategy here.
- Horticulture – is looking prosperous, but think it is on the edge (don't think they'll outlast the drought), it is already known that permanent plantings can't be supported based on the current capacity.
- There is an issue of foreign and corporate investment – people think it is great to get corporate agriculture into the region, but it doesn't always stay in the region.
- Our potential is enormous – we have the best situation and infrastructure but it's being wasted. We are probably the most resilient and adaptable area around (annual cropping) farmers are diverse, look at markets and change our rotations accordingly. Yet here we are in this dire situation.
- No confidence in the future - there has been a big decline in water for some time, what guarantee can the Basin Plan give me for the future? Young people aren't even coming back so is there a future? Comparison between now and the Millennium Drought is that this time we feel cheated and don't have confidence in the rebound.
- Environmental concerns and disconnect with water allocation. We've flooded the forest, and put water in the lower lakes but we have no allocation. When the Dams were pretty full, but we only got 50% allocation, that was a warning sign. The world



has changed, but the rules haven't. We pay the fees of running the system but we don't get water.

- We have the infrastructure but we need to stay positive and fight for it. We need some people at the top who are going to listen and change things.
- None of the dairy farmers in the region think they can cope/have a future. General feeling that they are still being expected to provide business plans and budgets etc. and they just can't do this because there is no certainty. We purchased more entitlement a few years ago, but when GS is 0% it doesn't matter. Putting water down stream is just ridiculous. The conveyance loss is an issue, we will never have an allocation again if that keeps going.
- Impacts at the school/on children are significant. Strong community, but kids are coming to school with anxiety and depression, bursting into tears. People are coming dirty, strung out, needing breakfast. We are trying to keep the school as an oasis but there is a slow response on getting councillors and support from government to manage this.
- Mental health issues for adults as well - GPs are seeing vast increases in mental health issues on both sides of the river. There is no confidence even when it rains, people are getting pushed too far.
- It is a real kick in the face to get drought relief when we could've just had water. We get that Tamworth is dry as well, but if we have water we can make fodder to go north. We are all pretty sick of the rules but the paradigm has changed, rules and management change and then trade.
- Reports are all there but unless you do something, what is going to change? We commissioned this work and just didn't get any cut through.
- Our community will adapt but we have less capacity, resilience and contentment. We have a can do attitude but we need transparency and accountability on the other side.
- Thinks partitioning impacts is somewhat stupid when the impact hits. We are being hit by climate change and Basin Plan. Spending a lot of money on looking at impacts is purely academic and a waste of time.
- We run a really good agricultural program at the school – you would be hard pressed to find another school that does this so well. And that is because the community really pitches in on this to run it. Whether it is fodder, transport etc. it is so important for our program (it is keeping people at this school, and it attracting others).
- Becoming understaffed and underfunded in education and health services. We are trying to support each other and trying to attract people but we don't even have confidence to employ people for more than 12 months.
- If people adhered to the cap – we would have another 20% in our GS. There is so much skull-duggery up north. Lots of questions around the rules in the losses. Have not found an answer to some insidious rule changes included loss accounting.



[When asked: *How do you believe water management and reform has changed your community? If so, can you describe how?*]

- The Plan was not meant to have any third party impacts. But the third party impacts are enormous, there are a lot of rules changes and changes in reliability.
- No one is taking into account that you are breaking these communities. We are pitting neighbours against neighbours – somebody has to feel the pain from the Plan, and it is our lives that are taking the hit. There is nothing left. It is all political, states and federal government.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What does 'success' for your community look like?*]

- Immediate short term support to help with family decline and wellbeing.
- This district will probably have one third of the farms we have today. You need a process to facilitate that change. We have a lot of last generation farms. We need to help those people get out. Putting money into expanding businesses will help this (by letting people off the land).
- We want the water security to be better. It is about getting our fair share, we have always been at the end of the chain.
- Science is greater than it ever was, but we don't seem to have more transparency and tighter operation of the river. This would be a good way to increase confidence.
- Community builds from within, and that is where you will get the best adaptation.
- One weakness is that we are running out of quality people to drive good outcomes (losing leadership) and those people are increasingly tied up with surviving.

[When asked: *What roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- The MDBA is no longer an authority that protects irrigation. It is all about the green agenda and there is no balance.
- We also need to consider food security as a policy.
- Need government to provide support for mental health issues.
- Can't operate with the uncertainty / risk of the 450GL (and the conversion of 605 to buyback).
- This government refuses to put money into RnD. If we are going to take this region forward then we need serious development to support it. No RnD plan.
- We have got to review the Agreement – the rules and how the water is shared. The reason for this is the August allocation determination or we will never get water. We



have a choke that is about to fall over. Not talking about taking entitlements of people or anything but looking at how we operate it.

- No confidence in politics. We can deal with drought but you can't deal with the politics – 37 inquiries but they are going to push on with the Plan.
- Need better management of the river. We're told this is a drought. 1 July to today 1m ML went through Tocumwal. Most of that will go out to sea. It isn't drought, it is how they are running the river. Lake Victoria is already full and then they lower it. We are getting shafted left right and centre. The Darling is dry which is fine, but the Murrumbidgee delivers almost nothing to the Murray (so again we are making up the difference).
- Government needs to facilitate the redevelopment process. It's not just about funding, but about support for the community to change.
- We've lost \$100,000 in funding to local primary – because it is based on enrolments. They take a snapshot on student numbers and then fund us accordingly. We are deemed inner-regional – we are funded in the same way as Bendigo, the difference in funding is \$850 per student. So our ability to survive is being really severely taken down.
- Media is influencing the support in the region. There is still the belief that the river is dead and dying – media pedals that. Don't see how people will put support into the region while people are still of that view.
- Environmental goals are very fluffy – are they smart goals, are they being measured and how do we know it is working.



Key Messages from Shepparton Drop-In Session

2pm – 4pm, 3rd October 2019, Shepparton RSL

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Feels like we are really falling down – sick of the Basin Plan and Dairy farmers are suffering huge losses. 102 farms in 25km radius from Numurkah have shut down since Dec 2018, another 9% expected to leave this year, and another 10% the next year. Only about 1/3 of people in the Dairy industry doing well.
- Moira Shire is a really great place to live but we are struggling. There were third generation fruit growers until the bank said no more. The health of Invergordon is poor and the community has stopped. Many struggling outside of Shepparton e.g. IGA in Tatura (not enough people in town to support the retail outlet).
- We went from 2.2B litres to 1.7 B litres last year which had a huge impact on manufacturing businesses. There is over capacity and underutilisation.
- The change in farming system from irrigation based to supplementary feeding has increased costs.
- We try to be positive and upbeat but there are huge impacts that keep flowing through. Issues link to other policy and planning concerns e.g. infrastructure fees and speculators.
- We have developed a lot of land but are uncertain if the water will be there to justify using it.
- We're only just now, as a people, getting socially and economically included in conversations regarding society and policy. Need to look at where the people can be effectively involved.



- Environmental concerns are really important to us but not sure how to address the problem.
- We don't have respect for history and there is little sense of cooperation and support. The youth are getting used and abused by the system, and some addicted to drugs. Leaders are ignoring issues and not doing anything. Foreigners are taking jobs but getting abused and ripped off. There is a rural financial counselling service which people should use but are not.
- Frustration is really high and there is no security, which has a bad impact on health. So many are tempted to just sell up, and many of our neighbours already have. There is concern that these struggles are a 'new norm' - will we be back in this situation very time we have a drought?
- No sense of understanding from politicians. It is impossible to make a living and we are all taking pay cuts, but the politicians don't understand yet make all the decisions and lie to us. Feel like we have been conned by management investment schemes – all the rules we follow support these schemes.
- The river and environmental water are not being looked after – feels like we are sacrificing our environment. River is getting trashed, and it is the only source of recreation for us. Poor management has ruined the choke/forest damaging the environmental water – we are looking to sue the government as they have run it over capacity and there is a lot of angst. Barmah choke is a very delicate environment.
- A sense of disconnect e.g. someone approved the development of more desert/marginal land but a lot of water is needed to support these permanent plantings. While there is better change and inclusion, it is not at a level where we can do what we prefer to see done.
- Need alternatives for non-Dairy production because there has been a drop in milk and Dairy. Also need Dairy innovation.
- Our issues have been hidden by the \$2bn connections spend. If that wasn't spent in the region, we would be struggling and that is wrapping up soon.
- There is diversity in the region but we need to sustain this.
- This area has enormous potential but there is a lack of community confidence. Need representation and need water.
- Need to stop growing almonds and avocados. It makes everything less effective and more futile.
- Haven't properly metered the upper catchment which is an issue. There is good evidence for telemetry metering and it gives people more confidence.

[When asked: *How do you believe water management and reform has changed your community? If so, can you describe how?*]

- Most of the efficiencies are being underutilised at this time. Reform has driven us back to reliance on trade and carry over (up to 70%).



- There is a huge drain on people's emotions and wellbeing – businesses are leaving, domestic and family violence is escalating, lack of respect for each other and no sense of community cooperation.

[When asked: *What makes your region or community different – what are the major strengths and opportunities, or challenges?*]

- The modernisation and scale of the GMID area is a strength.
- We are a service community and our knowledge base is very high but some regional centres are at risk of becoming just service centres rather than agriculturally based. Need to prioritise agriculture.
- There is a downturn in retail, particularly in water-related communities – decline is greater than expected. Big towns will get bigger but smaller towns will struggle.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What does 'success' for your community look like?*]

- More power and more positivity.
- An acknowledgement of the issue and urgency in resolving it.
- Having a plan and adapting to it.
- In the Dairy industry, we will need more fodder/feed – don't have enough for the next 3 years. Only 30% doing well, need to bring up the other 70%.
- Need new entrants and a way to encourage people to come and live here.
- Confidence in decision-making, certainty and reliability, otherwise our children won't be taking on the business.
- Need to ensure that water is used on the land – reintroduce water trade to be used on the land. Change the policy and rules. Don't separate land and water.
- Success is traditional small family farmers, not corporates.
- Research investment to utilise knowledge and plan for adaptation.
- Need policy recognition re. location – if you are closer to the source, you should maintain water in the area.

[When asked: *what roles can governments, industry, non-profit groups, First Nations, communities and individuals play in supporting prosperous and sustainable Basin communities?*]

- We need legislation to properly manage the water coming into the river into Broken, then Goulburn, and then the Murray. We have no water allocation and this is the last year for WSPs. We have written to the Minister for a review but nothing has been done by the government.



- We're concerned that the authorities/government won't listen to what is happening and are sceptical about concerns turning into action. We need complete reform, or we will have to get out. These issues impact our whole community so the communities have to take the lead on making a difference.
- Vulnerability in the community is hidden by the low interest rates. Need to understand that real issues do exist.
- Need better management and protection of the river – deep frustration over the damage being done.
- We do not support the 450GL and want to get rid of it.



Key Messages from Shepparton Roundtable Session

4pm – 6pm, 3rd October 2019, Shepparton RSL

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- Socio-economic conditions of farmers have always resulted from a combination of things but there is quite a bit of despair at present. Conditions have cleaned out many of the big farmers. There are some walking away with a big pocket full of money. Big money comes from not using the local supply chain.
- Confusion on what direction we are heading towards and those that are left here are quite concerned.
- There has been such a big reduction in the number of farms operating and the number of people left.
- Primary production/agricultural industries are critical here and are dependent on water. There are other industries but they don't generate new wealth.
- Shepparton is travelling okay but social and economic issues need to be considered separately – we could have economic gain but still suffer social loss or change.
- There were publically funded strategies (e.g. climate emergency) but nothing for agriculture.
- Dairy is seriously struggling. We are paying a lot for horticulture, there has been a decline by about half in processing, we have lost 50% of Dairy farms and anticipate more to exit. Basin Plan has contributed to this but so has the drought/lack of water, competition for water, enormous conveyance losses going down the river, and a lack of investment.



- We have mental health issues especially when we have a really full river but are not allocated the water. There are people who are suicidal because they think that no one cares. There is a sense of inability to effect change.

[When asked: *What makes your region or community different – what are the major strengths and opportunities, or challenges?*]

- Social conditions – some parts of the community with social capital to thrive (good networks and community) but there is a part that has become really disconnected and this is speeding up. Maybe a 3rd of the community that are isolated and disengaged. Some people who were less aspirational or able to work, and higher prevalence of mental health issues and substance abuse.
- Influx of refugee and FN communities are leading the new cases. People are still finding a pathway up, but there are groups that are still very vulnerable and incapacitated to move upwards. People used to find their pathway on farms (that was a good segue), but there is a lack of water and we are bringing other people in to fill jobs, so it is not that simple.
- Lots of jobs, but often need highly skilled jobs – we need to join the two. None of the crops in the GV is picked by locals – there is an endemic issue there.
- Lack of support for people coming in. There is a rise in contract labour from overseas but we have a poor education system that creates an intense entrenchment of disadvantage.
- Children are suffering. Australian Early Childhood Development study showed increased number of children suffering in at least one domain. The levels of distress have compounded and got greater.
- People less willing to invest future generations here. There are less children in our schools and there is a shrinkage in people and economic activity.
- Not enough discussion about struggles – farmers often worried about other farmers but it feels like everyone is struggling so people don't really talk to each other about it.
- Dairy processing is a huge employer – loss of milk means less throughput and impacts jobs across northern Victoria. Need to understand where all the plants are.
- Diminishing milk pool for domestic supply is a real concern. If we just have exporters, we lose the value add in the region.
- Our environment is so much worse off. Lost lake McCowan which was a great asset. We get some environmental water down Goulburn to cover damage from inter-valley transfers but we need to consider biodiversity better. Lots of small wetlands have been lost from farms.
- Environment no longer serving us – cod fishing has been shocking, all the sand bars are under water so that families can't use it.
- This is the best place to run agriculture. We are in a really good location to be growing food and processing. Gravity system is so good and now we are putting it



down where you have to pump it (because we are no longer on gravity fed) – all the diesel supply for this is significant.

- If you go to Mildura compared to Shepparton, we are prepared to let people overuse that amount of water necessary to grow. We are being complete fools in setting something up so rationale and productive and overriding it.
- Externalities aren't being captured by the market. Further south need to pay for underutilisation of public resource and taking water further south (where it is less efficient). Think we need to promote this region as the perfect place to do irrigated agriculture. Have allowed the free market approach to guide where water goes – that's ok but need to look at the public spend in infrastructure, and also look at what is in the public interest.
- Need more alternatives. We're worried about everything getting dragged to almonds – if they go bust and since we've loss Dairy, we won't have other things as back up.
- Diversity is one of our real strengths. Let's not let the ACCC adjudicate that position.

[When asked: *How do you believe water management and reform has changed your community? If so, can you describe how?*]

- Complete crisis of confidence which has been caused by the steady stream of water reform (not just Basin Plan). We can't continue to lose communities at the rate of change that we currently have.
- Water reform has really destroyed primary production systems – need sunshine, rainfall, irrigation and soil. What has happened in the last decade is that we have shifted below the GMID to the arid zone. There is a thrill from blooming the desert, but it is not being properly used. We have turned away from having primary production systems where they should actually be.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

[When asked: *What does 'success' for your community look like?*]

- We want the best for the next generations. To do this we need the region and industry to be at a critical level that is self-sustaining. How will we sustain a larger population?
- We need to go to government to intervene and seek some more certainty – e.g. guaranteed minimums of allocation. The infrastructure and knowledge loss can't be switched on and off. Government have a responsibility to get systems right. There is no strategy or future for irrigation and agriculture.
- We need to better understand how we put pressure on the urban politicians to do more. We want recognition that leads to a response. Need investment that is transitional and makes any difference. Only investment is tied up to water (the efficiency side). We need to articulate what is 'non-negotiable' – that would be good to see. What is the standard that we will not accept?



- When we get a plan, we need to stick to it. We have no longevity and no confidence.
- Inter-valley trade cap – it creates a good outcome for us, but it is just a public policy setting. Let's find a few more.
- Agglomeration can have positives – need to group and leverage. But instead we are deconstructing without a plan. There is no RnD for corn, but we could be making some money there
- Never thought transitional funding was significant – we need more of that. We need leadership and we need transitional funding to be long term.
- We need to acknowledge climate change.
- Would love to see someone out there talking about incentives to get larger parcels and investment back into our region.
- Debate also needs to happen in the urban areas.
- Alignment between state and federal – needs to happen outside COAG. Standardisation?
- Landcare practice is declining as well.



Key Messages from Cobram Drop-In Session

9am – 11am, 4th October 2019, Barooga Sports Club

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[When asked: *How would you describe the current health and prosperity of your community?*]

- We have been flagging social impacts and economic impacts for years and nothing comes from it. Government needs to listen this time and make a difference.
- We got off on the wrong foot, it is all about environment, when we should have taken a whole of system approach. It is frustrating everyone in local government, as well as business people and farmers.
- We feel unable to inform decisions, government comes with a predetermined outcome in mind.
- Irrigation land is now worth less than dryland. The value of country has changed demonstrably. The people that purchase these properties are trapped with the infrastructure / network costs.
- In the Millennium drought, banks were advising selling permanent water to get money for the farm, it led to a really bad situation.
- Half the towns in NSW have no water but we have a river with full flood – it is hard for our communities to reconcile this.
- We used to have the ‘food bowl’ with all types of agriculture. The Barmah choke is lucky, it’s saving us.
- Environmental flows are supposed to mimic natural events, it’s just environmental vandalism. The amount of water going out of Shepparton to the west is ruining things. We are wrecking the whole system.



- Social impact: people are really frustrated, we all came here to swear at a politician, that's where the community mindset is at.
- Commentators talk about Indigenous management and drought, but they don't talk about water management more generally, and that is driving outcomes as well.
- Have been watching things going downhill. It is destroying the rivers because we have transferred so much water around and the system cannot cope. A lot of water is not environmental water it is almond water.
- Jobs are disappearing from the region very quickly.
- With the almond industry, what goes through choke is half of what they need (how are they going to adjust and get it through, the system can't cope).
- In the 60s we had lots of people coming here and seeing opportunity. Now we are seeing people packing up and moving out. People were effectively forced to sell water during the drought (to stay solvent), so it wasn't voluntary.
- Lots of opportunities and promises around the transition haven't come through but the impacts have (e.g. new industries like tourism are small and the employment and wealth creation is often variable or volatile). Whereas agriculture is an enduring wealth creator.
- We have become really efficient but the carpet has been ripped out from underneath us, we innovate and adapt but can't keep up. Lots of dairy farmers have left and many are on the brink.
- Being very conservative with my water management on GS can be workable. But every time you go through a small town there are empty shops everywhere, the decline is visible.
- Drug use across younger people and older people is rising.
- Really disheartened by commitment to the 450GL and feels like NSW Farmers Federation and National Farmers Federation aren't really representing us. It is inconsistent for the government to appoint this Panel but to stand by 'in full and on time'.
- Greater transparency on flows and holdings would be good.
- We want to be optimistic but there is virtually zero hope. We are being completely sold out and lied to. There is nothing worse than the federal government is not acting in the interests of the people. Politicians aren't representing us.
- Local football club and country football leagues are suffering (if they can man junior sides, it is a struggle to hold them post school and they disappear). It is really hard to have those clubs, and they are a really strong part of the social networks. If farmers have money, they bring employees and add to that fabric.
- Accountants are seeing significant revenue drops in farming and related business – like never before. It is a very significant shift.
- People are concerned for their futures – people who always invested are not investing anymore (some are still positive, but fewer and fewer are).
- Want to encourage young people on the farm, young people should have the world in their hands.



- It is hard to keep pace with the standards and expectations of cities in regional areas (including infrastructure and services, we aren't provided it and we can't fund it).
- Kids are being impacted and won't be generational farmers. Current stress is bleeding into mental health of everyone and people feel helpless.
- Local volunteers have been helping farmers with the drought. Demand is growing and we are relying on donations, we rely on hay donations and food. Started on Dairy crisis 3 years ago and still struggling. Many places have lost lots of jobs and revenue (sometimes over 70%).
- Businesses servicing Dairy are also declining, shedding jobs and losing customers. Some farms are becoming health hazards and need upgrades but there's not money to invest – it's getting more dangerous.
- If we say conservatively that a multiplier of 6-1 for every dollar (post farm gate) an estimate of \$1.2bn could be made in terms of losses from the farms that have gone.
- People are heavily in debt, and banking on farming, and children are suffering as a result. We are seeing kids at school who haven't even had breakfast – it is severe disadvantage, and the ones that get through all leave for Melbourne.
- We are absorbing the risks.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

- Think we need to lay out a plan of attack. To respond to this, there is something radically wrong and we need to get the politicians.
- No one thought the big town investor would come in so hard. Big investors should be hit with an infrastructure tax, at over 80% to really send a message to them. The federal government should take the private investor out of the equation.
- We should take water management back to the states. Someone should just take it on to reconnect water to land again.
- If you were to do an overlay of regional centres in the Basin and look at the tax receipts over the last five years that would be really insightful.
- Water is like air and we need more of it not less. There is no shortage of water, there is a shortage of distributable water. Intelligent government should be focusing on this and not redistributing water to other issues.
- What information do you need from us – what do you actually need from us to get the report done?
- We are confronted with economic and social data – but it doesn't capture what is happening, so this process is really valuable.
- Over 12 months ago we did a private economic survey which showed economic loss of \$5bn and now we have hired other people to do the same work – it's a waste of money. We already proved there is a \$5bn loss, this is just dragging out the process and slowing action from MDBA on what should be done. There is analysis that shows the overshoot of almonds and something needs to be done about that. We are seeing corruption down the river, not the market (the market just supports



commercial decisions), and then in addition we wear the conveyance loss to deliver water downstream.

- The report should recommend no more water rights downstream, and cap the percentage of allocation downstream to protect upstream. Corporates came out here and took everything and now they employ cheap migrant labour to service their businesses.
- Bringing the water back to zones would be good. The sensible areas are the ones closer to the dams. What is the point of forcing it through to these areas that have infrastructure?
- The Barmah is RAMSAR listed and should be protected.
- How can we change the city perception of our problem? Feeling like a bit of a rebellion is needed to change this. Think we need to protest and be heard. I talk to city people all the time, and they don't really get what we are facing.
- The boiling pressure is palpable and people don't want to wait, best hope is something from Cabinet by Christmas.
- Sick and tired of people saying we are in drought. Down here we are not in drought. We pay for water and upgraded infrastructure and we aren't using it. The irrigation district creates an environmental asset all along it.
- We need some kind of standardisation of entitlements and rules. Thought this would've been addressed in the pre-Basin planning process. But it was overlooked.
- Carryover is an issue and is favouring investors and those who are planning.
- Centrepiece is that public policy has broken the link between wealth generation and location and reinvestment – and that sits at the centre of this.
- We have a very powerful message to take back to government. These communities are hurting badly. There is something going on here happening faster and sharper than ever before. It's not just the policy but the corruption.
- We need a vision for the future, and we need leadership from government on this.



Key Messages from Cohuna Drop-In Session

1:30pm – 3:30pm, 4th October 2019, Cohuna Bowls Club

Overview

This document summarises key messages from engagement focusing on:

1. Current social and economic conditions in the community
2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

These two topics reflect the structure of the engagement sessions and consultation questions asked. This document reflects what the Panel heard during consultation but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Panel.

Detailed information regarding specific individuals has been withheld for privacy, and key points have been summarised and grouped where repeated. This is not a transcript of the meeting.

1. Current social and economic conditions

[Attendees opted to provide statements to the Panel hence there is not a direct alignment with consultation questions in some cases.]

- The data in the Cohuna town profile is completely wrong, and shows how disconnected decision-makers are from reality.
- There is a report on the Murray Darling Basin Plan on John Briscoe (in 2011) said it was never going to work, would never work. The Panel should read the report and catch-up on where we are up to. Australia was the world leader now we are the laughing stock. Briscoe's report concludes that the *Water Act 2007* was founded on political deception. Set the course for bad direction under the Basin Plan. Government should be urged to start again and redefine the principles and put Australia back into being a world leader.
- There is a bigger political agenda at play here. These politicians do not even understand the economics – highest value approach is not working, it's leading to boom and crash, and stranded assets.
- The Basin Plan was devised by Howard and Turnbull and was bipartisan but to support a green vote. Did this to get the green vote not for good outcomes.
- The government went on to purchase from willing sellers during a massive drought. All of this occurred during the Millennium Drought when people were forced to sell their entitlements on the free market.
- Carryover is also supporting manipulation.
- People also need to get their act together in Queensland and Northern NSW, this is a problem that we are being impact by.



- Many real businesses are failing because of the Plan. We want the Basin Plan gone, and managed by people without political interests. We are about to collapse here – infrastructure with no water flowing through it.
- At this meeting, we would like to see the community going on record to say that the Basin Plan continues to fail the people and the environment. Would like this meeting to consider this motion.

[Motion read but postponed until further statements made by the public.]

- Dairy is critical for this community, we worked so hard to make a living off farm, when water was \$70ML that was hard enough, it now costs me \$1,500ML before I can put any water into anything.
- How many farms have closed in the district – it isn't just the number but the reductions in the number of cows in the district.
- Why on earth people want almonds – and why do people put it out of the region all the way down the river. There hasn't been a farm sold with water on it in many years.
- In the last 40 years, the district has seen amalgamation and improvement on farms in the district. This has been undermined by the Basin Plan.
- Farmers sold entitlement and relied on temporary water, but people have struggled to maintain a performance level that maintained a return. Lower long-term certainty is further undermining the water that has been lost. We expect to see a lot of dairy farmers leaving the industry as a result.
- Selling the entitlements in the region is not the only driver. Even those who have not sold the entitlement are still struggling to be viable. Starting to see the canary in the cage farmers (i.e. the leaders) starting to drop off.
- The application of water can be controlled and the irrigation scheme with natural carries is excellent irrigation. People overlook the strengths we have here, dry and sunny weather is critical for growing what we need to serve the population at large. This is what has made the industry so successful.
- The Basin Plan is unjust and unnecessary. We are seeing environmental vandalism in the Gunbower forest with the over watering. Any sane administration would've looked at this properly.
- The Panel's Terms of Reference bundle drought, climate change and water management and reform – to bundle these issues together is a gross misrepresentation. We grapple with issues of climate and structural change all the time, the only one we haven't been able to handle is the Basin Plan.
- Bottom line is we cannot have 450GL. These communities are not sustainable without irrigation. This is triple line beneficiaries that are failing on all fronts.
- The idea that we even have to defend this community is insulting. Government thinks that we just have to serve them and not the other way around. Government is just playing games with our lives.



- They announced 450GL and then announced a report to look at social and economic impacts – this is just playing games, how can you genuinely look at social and economic conditions when the 450GL is on the table.
- We have had wars, droughts and plagues and we have survived right through until water reform started. We cannot adjust to this water reform – and we have been able to for everything else.
- The signs coming out of our institutions are just opinions, this is just ridiculous, there is no evidence or science, just opinions. It is bringing the end to the marvellous communities along this stretch of river.
- The morals and the ethics of these people talking about on time and in full is questionable.
- I think our community is on a knife edge, and if they don't listen to us they may as well turn the lights of for us on the way out – because that is where this community is at.
- When they announced taking the water for the environment – many were onboard, but we thought they were going to take it from NSW and Queensland, but they saw us as easy pickings and we were pushed by banks and the Millennium drought to sell our entitlements. You really need to question the notion of willing sellers in this context.
- We had Living Murray, but it is all going to SA and it just isn't having an impact. Which leads to the question of which environment is more important? What environment do they really want to look after?
- The other fundamental change was unbundling water from land – and now we are seeing speculators. It just people in the city buying it to make money. That is really causing our problems here. Giving the water to the environment is good, but we want it managed by people who understand.
- In the Millennium Drought – people worried about the trees but they survived.
- The MDBA never came and talked to the people who lived here. It feels like government thinks we are hicks and don't understand.
- We are losing the preschool and the pub is struggling. All the things that give us social meaning are dissipating.
- The environmental aspect of farming should be taken into account (we were flooded but didn't get any credit for it). We've invested on farm to protect natural environment (with natives to protect the riverbank, and then high flows just wrecked it). We have put in habitat to protect the Bellbrae Frog.
- We are environmentalists – we plant trees. It will be an environmental catastrophe if we stop the farming community (the land will be full of weeds and trash – it will be an environmental impact when the land isn't managed).
- We have our kids milking cows because we are finding it that tight. We are trying to make hay to keep cows going. It tears our hearts out to see this. The Basin Plan is the worst thing we could imagine – it is a nightmare that we wake up to every morning.



- Environmental watering is inconsistent with the science, this is proven by the recent Peter Gell inquiry – an academic who has peer reviewed work – so why are we flooding our forests at such a significant rate.
- There have been 15,000 cows lost from the region in the last 12 months. All the genetics, all the grieving, it is all gone. Over the last 12 months, there will be \$30m that will not be circulated in our community as a result of the decline. School numbers have halved in the last few years, some schools are about to close.
- Sporting clubs are struggling for numbers, and the mental health of our community is struggling as well. We need more councillors, they cannot work. We need more funding in this area to support that (or we just need more water).
- Local doctors seeing a lot of people with mental issues and there is no support. Often the best solution is to improve the underlying causes which is no water in this case. We see a lot of acute suicidal people with no counselling and people would be made better if there is water. There is also an increase crime and an increase of violent crime. We are encouraging violent behaviour (look at the channel blocking) – that shouldn't be popular, and it is worrying that it is occurring more. We have four doctors working all the time.
- The social impact is out of control. Really don't think the politicians realise how close people are to the edge. People are fighting everyday – we need a project every single day to fight this thing. We have three kids milking everyday – we would walk away if we could. We have teachers trying to help but they have work due.

2. Potential actions, opportunities and solutions

- The community also needs to help itself; we don't have assets – reliant on the temporary market. We are some of the better farmers in the room, but you can't get blood out of a stone. If we go, we won't be coming back. A lot of these people have more fight than anymore. Government has got it very wrong it will get very serious and people will get very hurt. They don't think that, but they should.
- It is essential that we get the following three things:
 1. Get water to people immediately – convert conveyance losses borne by the environmental water holder, not the productive sector (before they get allocation).
 2. If you didn't have Hume, Dartmouth and Snowy they would be dry, so any water in the river is environmental water. CEWH needs to change the rules on this.
 3. Build Lock 0 immediately and open the barrages. This would give you 2700-3000GL back into production. Just pumping it out to sea is a waste.
- People are not acting, and our leaders should be forced by public opinion to face up that this. We are destroying the food bowl of our nation.
- The head of the MDBA is talking nonsense, destroying livelihoods, and destroying the environment.
- Do it next week, get it done, next week – get 1 million ML back into the production – do that, and then build Lock 0.



- We need to fix trading rules and the act, but get on with Lock 0 and changing the conveyance water. December is too late for us.
- For every 1000 ML through the barrage, it takes 2000ML to get there, so we are losing that much down the river and then we spend \$100m on drought assistance. At the stroke of a pen that much could be put back into productive use. It could be done that simply.
- Used to work on farms and employ people, it was bustling – we’ve always been a thriving hub. Climate change doesn’t scare us, we are using half the water we were using 20 years ago, and doubling the fodder we produce. But now we are losing young people and the percentage of spend in the community is less and less. We used to have a few dealerships in town but they’re gone.
- When we split the rural water and urban water corps – we had the same feeling around the room. There was a period of time there were people were accused of civil disobedience – and we pushed through.
- We would like to see the Water Act 2007 reviewed – because we need to push back. It doesn’t matter what legislation you have until it is tested in court of law.
- Don’t underestimate the power of the people when they get together and be careful or there will be bloodshed in this country.
- Built a really good shed and worked really hard. The river is running very full – went to the weir. There is blue green algae above the weir and brown water. Not one trickle is going through the weir from up north. None of those rivers are running through Bourke.
- Newspaper and farmer – came back in the middle of the Millennium Drought, but we pulled through. But currently we are seeing a current decimation of all of these things. It is appalling – have a real concern with how community engagement is going. We have people who are heartbroken.
- Nimmie-Caira – observed a watering of the environment going out to no trees and no swamps, going out through the field, kilometres long, and kilometres wide. Said it was a leakage, but it was actually an environmental water release.
- We have 2,500km of waterways that are not fit for native fish breeding because of the cold water. We have real science on cold water pollution that is not suitable for fish. Huge breed up of European carp as a result.
- There are provisions for critical human needs – we could make that to allocation, 30% each side. The government is not governing, they are kicking it down the road.
- We have 37 reports – it’s that simple, no one is admitting it is not working. There are bits in the *Water Act 2007* that cannot be achieved without flooding private property. We won’t move that body of sand at Coorong. Privately people say it can’t happen, but the politicians don’t have the guts to front up.
- We needed a special allocation a few months ago (not to be stored or traded) – this could have been used wisely and we would have saved a highly productive season (but that potential has not elapsed – too late). Fodder production could’ve been tripled, dry conditions have ruined crops and fodder. It could’ve saved us from a short-term impact that will have long lived implications. We made this demand to



Peter Walshe and told him to implement it. We put it in as a test, think it got taken to the National Party Council but it didn't get up so we have a definite political problem. Peter Walshe should at least be here today.

- We have a huge increase in food hampers going to farmers and the community. You can't really be jovial in the community because of the current climate.

Motion reintroduced:

- Sets out two immediate actions and 16 sub-points. Immediate actions read out:
 1. Victoria to withdraw from the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the Basin Plan is replaced.
 2. Immediate reallocation (to the consumptive pool) of the excess water carried over by both the Environmental Water Holder and South Australian high reliability water allocation to the legitimate NSW and Victorian irrigators that actually used water on their property last year.

[Other sub-points not read to the crowd.]

- Attendees of the Cohuna community drop-in meeting widely support this motion.
- Construction of Lock 0 also widely supported.