



# MACQUARIE MARSHES ENVIRONMENTAL LANDHOLDERS ASSOCIATION

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## **Introduction:**

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

The aim of MMELA is:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Underpinning the debate is everyone's concern for the future and what a changed water regime will mean for them and their family, their business and their grandchildren. Questions arise such as:

- Will it mean less food production?
- Will it mean more expensive food?
- Will it mean healthier rivers with more productive floodplains and wetlands and no net change in food production? Will communities survive?
- How can we manage with less water and how will we share the water in a fair and equitable way?
- Will future generations say we were wise, that we heeded lessons of the past, that we were considerate and caring about both people and the environment?
- So many questions and no easy answers!

We think it is important to step back to understand how this happened and make sure we do not repeat history, as is often the case. The Macquarie Valley is an example of the mismanagement of New South Wales water resources by a succession of governments and water agencies over the last 50 years.

When Burrendong dam was completed in 1966/67 the yield of the Macquarie River was assessed as 406000Megalitres (ML). By 1978 extractive water users in the valley used about 80% of the allocated water. This resulted in the Water Resources Commission (WRC) declaring that the river was over allocated and an embargo should be placed on the issue of future extractive licenses. In 1979 the WRC introduced such an embargo but by this time the annual estimated yield of the river had risen to 475000ML and licences continued to be issued through loop holes in the system.

Original licenses were area based licences. These stipulated the area of land that could be irrigated not the volume of water that could be taken. To try to control the amount of water being taken, volumetric licences were introduced. This system apportioned volumes of water (Mega litres/hectare) to a property.

ALL valleys in NSW were allocated 6ML/ha for the conversion to this new licencing system but for some unknown reason the Macquarie Valley was allocated 8ML/ha for irrigators on the

river and 6ML/ha for off river schemes. By 1985 the total allocated water for extraction was 612000ML (452000ML was for riparian irrigators and 160000ML for off river schemes). As the revised estimated long term average yield of the river was 475000ML the Macquarie was now over committed by 137000ML.

It gets worse! In 1985 allocations to existing licenses were increased by about 13000ML despite concerns and objections from stakeholder groups. From then to now the allocations for extractive use have risen to 738000ML for the Macquarie/Cudgegong system (the Cudgegong River flows into Burrendong Dam from the Mudgee area). With such mismanagement the damage is widespread, indiscriminate and long lasting!

And what sort of environment will we leave for future generations? Our wetlands which provide ecosystem services and support a great diversity of flora and fauna, including many threatened and vulnerable species, have drastically decreased in number and size. They have been radically changed by the fewer and smaller floods which are now the norm. The environment deserves better than this.

MMELA members have been shocked with the way the proposed gin gin re regulating weir has been handled. Our members have challenged the information provided and find Water NSW is extremely difficult to trust with their customer focused corporate policy direction.

Why can we accept any information that water NSW provide, they are the river operators who are hell bent on reducing surplus flows and reducing losses that is the very water that underpins our grazing systems.

Some points that MMELA feel have not been addressed in the proposed weir referral.

- Water NSW tell us that the proposed weir will not capture any flows from the Tributaries, the current river operations includes using tributary flows to fill water orders. Water NSW will not provide the historical usage of these flows .Until this is made available there should be no reason to accept that more tributary flows will be harvested.
- Water NSW have failed to show why they believe there will be minimal impact to the Marshes and flows providing connectivity to the Barwon River. This must be made available and then it will be for all to see that the impact to the Ramsar listed wetland is significant.
- No assessment has been made into the negative impact of the re regulating weir to the grazing industry that exists in the marshes and along the floodplains of the lower Macquarie. The structure is likely to reduce the low flows that will significantly reduce the water couch and common reed beds that are the mainstay of our beef production enterprises.
- No assessment has been carried out into the unregulated irrigation industry, the proposed weir will be accessing the very water that is available to this industry and re allocating it to general security entitlement holders in the regulated section.
- No evidence has been provided from water NSW that convinces us that basic landholder rights will not be reduced.
- Water NSW told us that the recent drought was a catalyst for change. During the drought, extended lengths of the regulated reach was dried out. This was a direct result of water NSW allocating water that hadn't fallen as rain .The catastrophic events including fish kills and the loss of hundreds of Broad shell

turtles along this section of regulated reach is an example of the failure of NSW policy of water allocation. More Dams don't make more water, they just capture water that is currently providing a vital service to the environment and other users and re allocate that water to others.

- Water NSW have no experience or ability to understand the impact of the proposed weir on the sensitive eco system that underpins the very fundamentals of how the wetland functions. The last major build in the valley was the Windermere Dam in the mid-1980s. This was an environmental disaster and is located so far up in the catchment, its mostly less than 50% full. The impact of dams are greatly increased if they are empty as they have the capacity to capture all flows. Our association still remember the promises that were made during this period and we do not accept that the structure will not have similar impacts to the Marshes.

Our association completely disagrees with the proposal as there is nothing in it for us and the potential to lose allot.

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