

MURRAY-DARLING FACT FILE: Issue No.1

25th October 2010

Today, we released the first issue of our Murray-Darling Fact-File series, in response to statements made by some sections of the irrigation lobby apparently intent on denigrating the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and further compromising the aims of the Basin Plan:

STATEMENT:

“... we need to have a discussion about how to balance the competing needs of social, economic and environmental assets. We haven't done that yet - but if we don't start soon, it will be too late for two of them.” (Source: www.basinplan.com.au: website established by the NSW Irrigators Council).

FACT ONE:

Rather than being a competitor with responsible human activities, a healthy environment provides essential “ecosystem services” vital to us all, but especially to those on the land: most notably soil formation, water supply and regulation, nutrient supply and cycling and biodiversity conservation.

In 1997, the value of such services, provided free to communities worldwide, was estimated to be in excess of \$US 30 trillion dollars per annum, around twice global annual product (Source: “The Value of the World's Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital”, Nature Vol. 387 (1997)).

The value of ecosystem services provided to the Basin by an environmentally healthy Murray-Darling river system has yet to be determined, but an estimate of several billions of dollars annually would not be unreasonable.

Few would deny the absolute need to provide effective assistance to Basin communities as a result of the necessary reductions in diversions for irrigation. Further research as announced by the Authority may clarify the social impacts and the scope of the support required - but change is inevitable and well overdue.

A recent study published in the highly-respected international science journal “Nature”, confirmed the severity of problems facing the Murray-Darling Basin.

The paper, “Global threats to human water security and river biodiversity”, indicated that much of the Murray-Darling Basin faces high to very high threats in terms of both water security and biodiversity.

In the absence of a healthy environment, societies and economies are unsustainable beyond the short term.

Unless meaningful action is taken to reverse the ecological degradation of the Murray-Darling Basin and its recent inability to resist drought - a direct result of the overallocation of water and inappropriate irrigation practices - its environment will become increasingly unable to provide the essential ecosystem services upon which future generations of Basin farmers must depend.