

Murray-Darling Plan draws mixed verdict after five years

Rex Ellis with his dog Bill on the Murray River near Morgan, South Australia. Picture David Geraghty

SUE NEALES THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM January 13, 2018

Danny Thomas grew up in the thriving Victorian heartland town of Shepparton more than 40 years ago, when the surrounding Goulburn Valley was a fertile patchwork of gurgling irrigation channels, shady fruit blocks laden with pears and peaches, and small dairy farms, each with 150 milking cows grazing in lush, always-green pastures.

Today Thomas, the burly rural real estate boss with CBRE who sells multimillion-dollar properties to foreign corporate farming arrivals, says he hardly recognises his former home.

Most of the dairy farms have gone. Their small irrigation supply channels are dry, shut off from the remaining main water system.

The old Dethridge water-measuring wheels sit silent, a reminder of a time when water was cheap and no one questioned the economics of using scarce water from the Victorian mountains on the driest continent on earth to grow fresh grass for cows producing cheap milk.

“It’s a dust bowl now compared to when I grew up; the irrigation water has gone elsewhere and the dairy farms are dry, disappeared or operating on very little water to survive,” says Thomas, an expert in the value of big commercial irrigated land in the vast Murray-Darling Basin.

“But that’s a good thing. Yes, the dairy farmers might be the losers in all this but it’s a disgusting waste of valuable water to use it to grow paspalum and rye-grass.

“The truth is that everything we said should happen in terms of putting a proper value on water under the plan is happening. The water is there if you have the money to pay for it. It’s going to its highest-value uses such as almonds and cotton, and agriculture in the Murray-Darling Basin — especially in the southern river system — is so much more efficient as a result.”

Thomas’s decidedly economic-rationalist view of the achievements of the \$13 billion Murray-Darling Basin Plan after its first five years of operation is not shared by everyone.

While Thomas measures the plan’s early success in terms of foreign capital pouring into the region to buy rundown dairy and fruit farms, redevelop and combine other properties into mega-corporate almond and cotton plantations, and to spur investment in processing plants, river explorer and adventurer Rex Ellis is more worried about whether its central environmental objectives are being met, or at least tracking positively.

“I think the balance between the environmental and agriculture is getting better but that’s easy to say after a couple of good (rain) years when there’s been plenty of water around for everyone,” says Ellis, who lives on the cliffs of the Murray River near Morgan, South Australia, with his famous timber paddleboat, *The Dromedary*, moored beneath.

“I’m hopeful we are seeing the numbers of the endangered regent parrot — it’s a beautiful thing and it lives here in the Riverland — stabilise, but everything is so tied together that I worry that in a dry year when water is scarce, greed will take over again.

“For things to get better they must adhere to the plan in full and make sure that in a dry year or two everyone pulls in their belts and puts the river first; because if the river gets crook or out of balance, the first thing that goes is the ecology.”

The new federal Agriculture and Water minister and Queensland Nationals MP David Littleproud wholeheartedly agrees with Ellis that the plan must be delivered in full as agreed and the interstate bickering must cease.

His stance is perhaps surprising given the open implacable opposition of his predecessor and leader Barnaby Joyce to any more water being taken from irrigators and farmers.

Littleproud — whose vast Maranoa electorate includes the Queensland headwaters of the Darling river system and controversial Cubbie Station, the largest cotton grower and water user in the land — says he is committed to adding an additional 450 gigalitres to the amount of water to be returned to the environment by 2024, despite angry irrigator opposition.

“I ask for calm. We all have to work collaboratively and the extra 450GL (for the environment) is part of the plan and must be respected, although I haven’t got a fixed mind on how we achieve (that water retrieval),” Littleproud tells Inquirer.

“This is a pivotal moment in the future of the basin and we all won’t get exactly what we want. But the reality is that the economics of water are playing out and there is cautious optimism and investment returning to agriculture. We just all have to remember that means meeting outcomes and targets for the environment too.”

On this key question the recent Murray-Darling Basin Authority five-year review — the plan is not due for first-stage completion until 2019 and final resolution until 2024 — is muted.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan was agreed in 2011 by all affected states and federal political parties worried about too much water being sucked by farmers from Australia’s inland lifeblood rivers for commercial irrigation purposes.

The plan aims to reduce the former 13,623GL annual irrigator water take — equal to nearly three Sydney Harbours full of freshwater a year — by 20 per cent, with the retrieved 2750GL of water owned by all Australians and managed by the independent Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder David Papps with the intention of delivering key environmental benefits.

These include improving native fish and bird numbers, ensuring river wetlands receive adequate and regular flooding, looking after the river red gum trees, reducing salinity, guaranteeing that a more generous supply of water makes its way down the Murray in South Australia to keep its Lower Lakes near Goolwa fresh and the river mouth open, and the restoration of more native vegetation.

Despite 77 per cent of water recovered from irrigators and 750 deliberate environmental waterings and flooding of wetlands since 2013, the MDBA maintains such a deeply damaged ecosystem takes time to recover.

But improvements are happening in some places, its reports say, with the rate of decline in water bird numbers slowing, an increase in native cod breeding, reduced salinity entering the river in South Australia, and improvement in the condition of some river red gum forests.

But Deniliquin rice grower Shelley Scoullar is most concerned about the impact of large-scale water withdrawal and heightened water insecurity, scarcity and price rises on rich irrigation districts such as the Murray Valley.

Scoullar, who is spearheading a Riverina campaign to make sure local rural voices are heard in the big cities, says the pain being caused is both real and deep, affecting farming families, jobs and local town businesses.

The Murray Valley, where the Scoullar family farms along the Mulwala channel, contributes an estimated \$550 million to \$700m in the annual value of its irrigated agricultural production to Australia’s gross domestic product.

Overall, farmers in the basin using irrigation to grow everything from wheat and cotton to rice, oranges, avocados, almonds and grapes contribute a total of \$7 billion.

“It’s all very well to talk about economics and water going to its highest-value use, but this is people and communities we are talking about, and taking so much water out of productive use is really hurting,” says Scoullar.

“You’ve got farmers of dairy cows, rice, wheat and beef cattle right across this region saying they can’t afford to own expensive water rights, irrigate every year or even keep going.

“That might be economically rational pricing of irrigation water but milk, bread and rice are staple foods that mums and dads need and want to feed their families — they can’t do that on almonds and olives alone.”

South Australian senator and federal Assistant Water Minister Anne Ruston believes it is these sorts of stories and impacts that city dwellers — especially ardent Greens voters and diehard environmentalists — need to consider before they casually condemn any farmer for growing water-thirsty rice and cotton.

(Cotton and table grapes are actually among the more efficient users of irrigation water, requiring seven to eight megalitres of water a hectare each year to grow, compared with almonds and rice, which require 12-15ML/ha.)

“I think there is a great disconnect between the city and the country, and much less understanding in the cities of the importance of the Murray-Darling Basin food bowl,” Ruston says.

“Just look at your dinner plate in Melbourne or Sydney, and on most days two-thirds of the food on it will have come from the Basin,” she adds.

“I say, don’t sit in judgment in the cities about what is going on in these river farming communities unless you take the opportunity to go out and see for yourself what amazing environmental managers and stewards these farmers are and how efficiently every drop of water is now used.”

Ruston is hopeful the balance between agricultural water use and protecting the precious ecology and sustainability of the river system is improving.

“I think we may have got the physical water distribution right — the volume of this finite resource split between farmers and the environment — but I don’t think we have got the narrative right,” says Ruston, who lives at Renmark in South Australia, where she owns a commercial rose farm.

“We still have a lot of people in the cities who think the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is solely an exercise in environmental protection and ‘saving’ the river when it’s not; it is about achieving a balance in resource sharing

“In that mix, there has to be more empathy for the people who grow the food, their communities and their livelihoods, because if you take the basin’s irrigated economic productivity away, that would impact on the food available to everyone, whether they live in the cities or regions.”



BOXING DAY TRAGEDY
‘He was a menace to society’

Actor Jessica Falkholt’s life support turned off as police officer reveals shocking backstory of driver who killed her family.



‘Dan doesn’t dine with gangs’

JASON GAGLIARDI

What our readers said this week on Victoria’s gang crisis, SHY’s snout in the trough, Hollywood hypocrites and global cooling.



Teens take it easy

Social scientists are seeking explanations for millennials’ moderate ways.



Danby under pressure to resign

RACHEL BAXENDALE

Labor MP Michael Danby is under pressure to resign ahead of the next election, but allies downplay suggestions he will be challenged.



All together now

PENNY HUNTER

It’s one of the biggest trends in travel, and a cruise ship is one of the best places to do it.



Still reaching for the sky

EAN HIGGINS

Dick Smith’s proudest achievement of 2017 has nothing to with business entrepreneurship or aviation reform.

Reader comments on this site are moderated before publication to promote lively and civil debate. We encourage your comments but submitting one does not guarantee publication. We publish hundreds of comments daily, and if a comment is rejected it is likely because it does not meet with our comment guidelines, which you can [read here](#). No correspondence will be entered into if a comment is declined.

A NOTE ABOUT RELEVANT ADVERTISING: We collect information about the content (including ads) you use across this site and use it to make both advertising and content more relevant to you on our network and other sites. This is also known as Online Behavioural Advertising. You can [find out more about our policy and your choices, including how to opt-out here](#)

[^ Back to top](#)



Terms of Use

- Editorial Code of conduct
- Standards of Practice
- Subscription terms
- Group Subscription Terms
- Accessibility
- Privacy Policy
- Relevant Ads Opt-out
- Cookie Policy

Contact Us

- Help
- Contact Us info
- Photo Sales
- News Archive

About Us

- About The Australian
- Advertise with us
- Our journalists
- Subscribe
- The Australian Plus member benefits
- Sign up to Newsletters
- Manage Your Newsletters