



SUBMISSION IN RELATION TO THE PROPOSED CHANGES TO
FLOOD PLAIN HARVESTING GWYDIR VALLEY

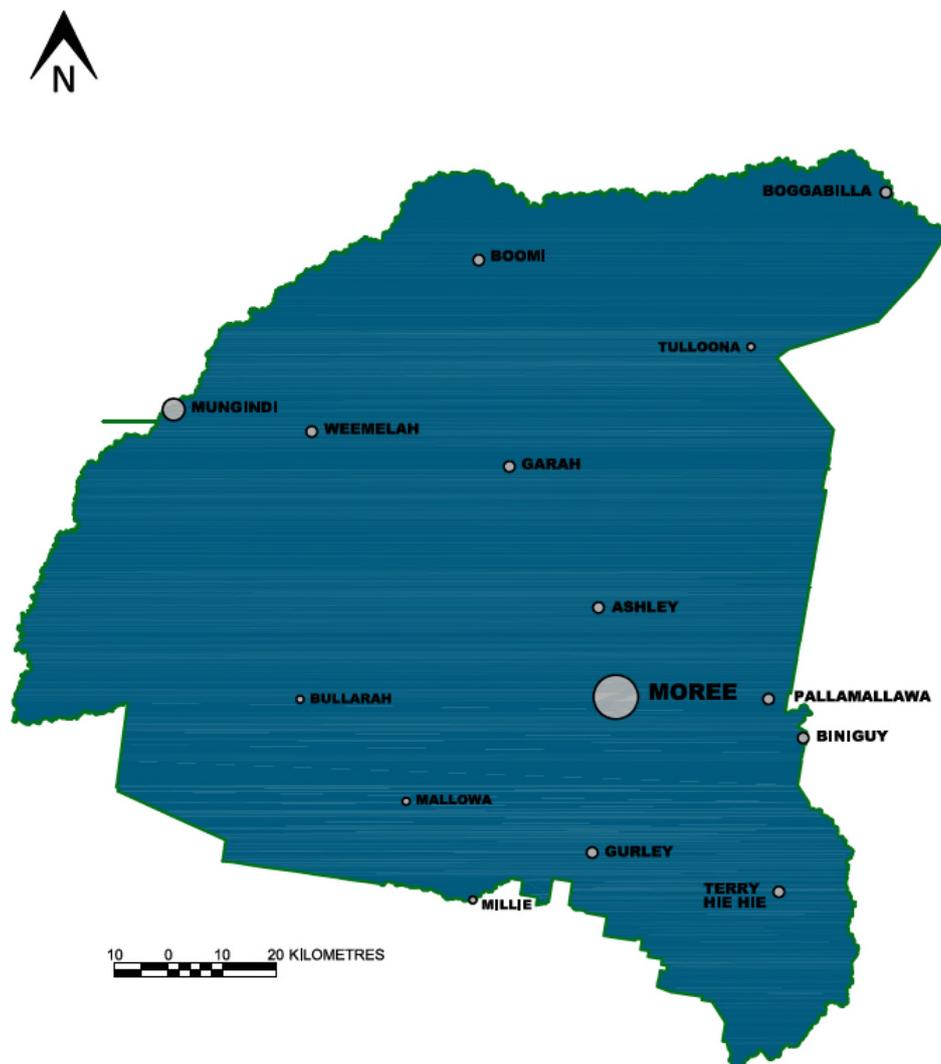
Overview

The Moree Plains Shire Local Government Area (**the Shire**) is renowned as the most productive agricultural shire in Australia, contributing nearly \$1 billion in agricultural production to the Australian economy each year.

Home to the Gamilaroi people, the region is endowed with rich, black, alluvial soils, and a substantial underground Artesian and sub-Artesian water supply in addition to the Gwydir, Mehi, Barwon, Boomi and Macintyre rivers.

According to the 2016 Census the Shire was home to 13,159 residents and covers an area of 17,928km² and includes the townships of Moree and Mungindi, and villages of Ashley, Biniguy, Boggabilla, Boomi, Garah, Gurley, Pallamallawa and Weemelah.¹

Moree is culturally diverse, of the 7,383 who reside in the urban centre of Moree, 25.6% identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 20.1% were born overseas.



¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics: 2016 Census, *Moree Plains (A)*.

As the Local Government Authority for the Moree Plains Shire, Moree Plains Shire Council (**Council**) - in addition to core service provision - is committed to increasing the prosperity of all residents in the Shire, improving outcomes, supporting local businesses, and attracting new industry.

As well as attracting new business Council is committed to assisting and maintaining the viability of Agricultural Industry which for so long has underpinned the shire's economy.

Despite its high agricultural productivity, the Shire has endured significant challenges over the past decade or so with water buybacks and more recently an extended period of unprecedented drought having far reaching ramifications across our community and in particular those directly or indirectly involved with the agricultural sector.

In the 2001 ABS Census, the Shire had a population of 15,680.

In the 2016 ABS Census the population had dropped to 13,159 impacting on agricultural productivity and employment opportunities in the Shire.

While the Shire's economy is based on agriculture, there are a number of service and retail businesses whose ongoing sustainability are directly related to the viability of the agriculture sector and any changes to the agricultural sector will have a dramatic impact on these businesses.

This in turn means a further reduction in population growth and employment opportunities without which we will see a continued decline in population which is not only evident in Moree Plains Shire but across rural New South Wales more generally and in particular communities west of the Newell Highway.

Importance of Flood Plain Harvesting

In 2011 over 70% of the agricultural production from this area came from the 10% of the land which was irrigated whilst the other land was still heavily dependent on a reliable water supply.

Water is very much the lifeblood of the Moree Community.

Floodplain harvesting involves the take of water from a floodplain in times of flooding and has historically made up to 30% of the total water usage. As such it is a vital input to our agricultural economy.

Flood plain harvesting generally only occurs when our rivers and creeks and flood plains are full and spilling and the take of water during these times is only a relatively small amount of the total flows available during a flood.

Once the opportunity to recover the flood water for agricultural purposes has passed it can't be recovered as the water would have passed downstream.

Impact of The Flood Plain Water Sharing Plan.

General

As mentioned Council has seen the dramatic impact cause to communities within Moree Plains Shire area and within adjoining shires brought about by the buyback of water and exacerbated by the period of prolonged drought.

Water security is vital to the agricultural sector within the Shire over 70% of agricultural production coming from the 10% of Irrigated land.

We can ill afford to see any further reductions in the potential availability of water if the level of agricultural production is to be maintained or improved.

Impact on Downstream Communities in Limited

Despite claims relating to significantly greater benefits to downstream users if flood plain harvesting in the norther basin was reduced was stated at the Community Consultation meeting in February that even if Flood Plain Harvesting in the Northern Basin was completely removed it would not impact the Lower Darling allocations by any more than two (2) percent.

Socio- Economic Impact

The Murray Darling Basin Plan and its introduction has a profound impact socially and economically on many communities many of which will never not fully recover, resulting in loss of employment, school numbers, reduction of services and retail sector and the ability of many communities to maintain such things as sporting and recreational groups so vital for the social amenity of these towns already struggling to attract residents and in particular those in fields such as health and similar skilled professions.

The lessons learned from the introduction of the Murray Darling Basin Plan and its impact on many communities should not be ignored and whilst always anticipating some negative impacts, strategies should be developed to minimise these impacts prior to the introduction of changes and not try and retrospectively address the irreparable damage to communities which is all but an impossible task.

Since 2001 Moree Plains Shire has population losses of 14% and this figure is also seen in the loss of population of Moree itself and has also see reductions in school enrolments and as such employment in this sector.

Impact of Compliance with Proposed Legal Limits

Any decision as to legal limits should give strong consideration as to the socio-economic impacts and the ability to value add to the water available, with the proven productivity of this area providing a compelling case for the retention of the existing supply of water from Flood Plain Harvesting.

Council understands that licencing will provided certainty and consistency to this important source of water for the agricultural industry and the community more generally as well as

the environment. Licensing also makes it accountable, measurable and manageable like all other sources of water used by the agricultural industry.

However, if the limits applied are not realistic and too restrictive they have the potential to increase the likelihood of drought like conditions and the decline of the socio-economic conditions within the communities with little additional benefit to the environment which is one of the aims.

Transitional Arrangements

There would seem to be a compelling case for transitional arrangements to be put into place to allow for an increase in allocation in the initially stages to allow for an increased take should the availability of water allow for same rather than have an increased amount of water flow downstream with little benefit when the water could be gainfully utilised within the Shire as it has previously.

Trade

The current restrictions in relation to trade would seem at this stage to be restrictive and not allow for an equitable allocation of the available water and should be revisited

Current Legislation.

Whilst the current legislation in its current form makes the utilisation of water accountable, measurable and manageable like all other sources of water used by the agricultural industry. It is not in its current form supported by Council who would like to see an increase in allocations plus the introduction of transitional arrangements that would ensure that available water in the first few years of the licencing will be available to landowners as it would in the ensuing years if the entitlements had not been previously utilised.

Council understands the need to ensure that legislation is in place to protect water as a vital resource but equally believes that before any legislation is passed that consideration to the socio-economic impact of the legislation is given to prevent a repeat of the issues which arose with the introduction of the Murray Darling Basin Plan to the significant detriment of many communities many of which will never recover.

There is a need to re-populate the rural areas of Australia not de-populate and this logic should be at the forefront of any decision making.

Council understands that considerable work has gone into the proposal thus far and there may be a reluctance by some to further extend the project but the livelihoods of individuals and communities are at stake as well as the viability of agricultural industries which have not only been the economic "base" of our economy in Moree for many years but the economic "base" for Australia more generally.

Council supports the requests from the local community for the amendments to be made to the plan which will make it much more acceptable to all parties and at the same time reducing the possibility of a further negative and irreversible socio-economic damage to

communities already struggling to overcome the impact of previous changes and extended periods of drought.