

liberal sa

River Murray



isobelredmond.com.au

River Murray

Contents	Page
Foreword	3
Labor's litany of failure	4
Murray Darling Basin	6
Flows	6
Control	6
Management	7
Environment	7
Key Issues	9
Riverland Recovery Fund	9
Salinity	9
Irrigation	10
Lower Lakes and Coorong	11
Acid Sulphate Soils	13
Save the River Murray Levy	14
Lower Murray Reclaimed Irrigation Area	15

River Murray

Foreword

The River Murray is South Australia's single most important natural asset. Its health and survival are pivotal to the wellbeing and economic prosperity of the whole state.

Management of the river has been a contentious issue since Federation at which time the river states squabbled and fought over rights to its waters. The extreme drought of the past six years and talk of climate change has highlighted just how serious the matter has become.

Decades of mismanagement and over-allocation, compounded by the current drought, has reduced the once mighty flow of the Murray to a trickle. South Australia has been the first to suffer the social and economic consequences of a dying Murray.

This is already apparent as the iconic and world-famous Lower Lakes and Coorong are threatened with extinction and much of the industry around the lakes' perimeter has already been lost. Additionally, many South Australian irrigators are struggling to survive on just over half of their water allocations while in some cases upstream users are able to use their entire allocation.

Despite incessant spin from the Rann Labor Government the fact is that they have allowed their interstate comrades to dominate negotiations and this has ensured South Australia remains entirely dependant upon the mercy of the upstream states.

The State Liberals, on the other hand, are committed to increasing South Australia's voice in the national water debate, restoring the Murray system to health, easing the burden on irrigators and minimising the demands of metropolitan users on the river.

It's time for change – South Australian needs better



Isobel Redmond MP
Leader of the Opposition



Adrian Pederick MP
Shadow Minister for River Murray

River Murray

Labor's litany of failure

Rann Labor's failure to identify, develop and utilise other water sources – particularly for urban areas - has left South Australia in an extremely vulnerable position; we are almost entirely dependent on the charity of other states for our survival.

In July 2008, after earlier stalling the former Federal Liberal Government's \$10 billion plan to save the Murray, Prime Minister Rudd, his Water Minister Penny Wong, Premier Rann and his Water Security Minister Karlene Maywald, loudly and proudly announced a 'historic' agreement that would save the Murray Darling Basin.

The agreement is deeply and fatally flawed. This point was made strongly at the time by the Liberal Party.

The issue was brought to a head following widespread flooding in New South Wales in January 2010. Following the floods the New South Wales irrigators upped their irrigation allocations to 100%, dams were overflowing and all efforts were being made to divert and capture as much water as possible.

New South Wales communities have also suffered throughout the drought, however while this was occurring, across the border in South Australia, irrigators continued to operate on a fraction of their allocations, the lower lakes languished at environmental disaster levels, riverbanks were collapsing and salinity was increasing. These problems continue to worsen.

Premier Rann's recent plan to constitutionally challenge upstream States over water trading is evidence that the so called "historic agreement" is not worth the paper it is written on.

Additional Rann Labor Government failures include:

- Delaying the decision to build a desalination plant
- Obstructing privately funded desalination projects in the state's west
- Refusing to support the Liberal Party's proposed legislation on stormwater capture and grey water recycling and reuse – introduced into Parliament in November 2006.
- Its half-hearted approach to introducing and supporting water-saving technologies and practices in homes and industries, and
- Its wilful ignorance of Salisbury Council's innovative and successful water reuse programme (until the Rann Labor Government's belated attempt to take the credit for it).

While Labor governments have procrastinated and politicked options have dwindled, costs have increased and the recovery of the river becomes more and more problematic.

River Murray

In contrast, previous State Liberal Governments have played a key role in developing and contributing to a nationally co-operative framework for the management of the Murray Darling Basin.

It was a State Liberal Government which adopted and rigidly adhered to the 1995 Murray Darling Basin Agreement which capped the volume of water that can be extracted from the Murray.

It was also a State Liberal Government under which South Australia was the first state to sign and commit significant funds to the national Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

It was a former South Australian Liberal Government that proposed a \$300 million Murray-Darling initiative in 2001.

The State Liberal Party has a long history of taking meaningful action on the Murray and this is a legacy we intend to uphold.

River Murray

Murray Darling Basin

Flows

Currently, in times of low inflows, such as during a drought, South Australia is not necessarily guaranteed a minimum flow of water across the border. Agreements to date have ensured that all states have had water available to meet critical human needs.

The State Liberal Party believes that management of the volume of water pumped from the river upstream, together with the water buybacks and infrastructure works in upstream states, can be effective enough for South Australia to be guaranteed a minimum flow of 1850 gigalitres per annum regardless of upstream inflows. This would provide relief and some level of certainty for irrigators and the environment.

A State Liberal Government will:

- Lobby other Murray Darling Basin states and the Murray Darling Basin Authority to guarantee a minimum 1850 gigalitres of flows for South Australia regardless of overall river inflows.
- Support the buy-back of water from willing sellers to restore a healthy river flow.
- Pursue the investment of infrastructure into the Murray Darling Basin with the Federal Government.
- Press for maintenance of the national moratorium on any additional water allocations until the resource has been fully audited.

Control

A single Federal authority, responsible to the Commonwealth Minister, should have control of the Murray Darling Basin. This is the only way to ensure equitable treatment of all states. Despite the grandstanding of various Labor governments it is clear that current agreements are unable to deliver a sustainable environmental future for the Murray or its stakeholders.

A State Liberal Government will:

- Pursue an effective and binding Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreement on the future management and control of the entire Murray Darling Basin (MDB).
- Fight for the establishment of an independent body, exclusively responsible to the Commonwealth Minister.
- Work to ensure the health of the River Murray remains a priority on COAG agenda.

River Murray

Management

Nationally, and locally, efficient management of the Murray is essential. Despite questions over the long term viability of our current use of river water the Rann Labor Government has refused to set specific targets for reducing our consumption of river water.

Additionally, significant volumes of water are lost during transmission and storage. The highest levels of government accountability and efficiency should be required in this matter in order to minimise wastage.

A State Liberal Government will:

- After careful review, set specific targets aimed at reducing our consumption, particularly metropolitan, of River Murray water.
- Require state ministers to provide accurate reports about the quantity of water that is returned to the River Murray channel as part of environmental flow programmes.
- Support proposals and actions that seek to reduce water transmission and storage losses throughout the MDB.
- Lobby for a full and independent audit of the entire Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) resource.
- Maintain close communication with all river and lakes stakeholders to ensure a coordinated response to battling effects of the rapidly changing environment.

Environment

Along the length of the Murray Darling, and particularly in South Australia, environmental damage is becoming increasingly obvious. Riverbanks that have slumped or are collapsing due to low water levels have become a common sight.

In particular, South Australia's Lower Lakes and Coorong are recognised internationally for their unique plant, crustacean, fish and bird life populations.¹ This hugely diverse ecosystem is under threat from low fresh water inflows, rising salinity and the exposure of previously submerged acid sulphate soils.²

The State Liberal Party supports the calls of leading scientists and conservationists to preserve the Coorong and Lower Lakes as a freshwater environment.³

¹ <http://www.ramsar.org>

² <http://www.environment.sa.gov.au>

³ The Australian, Murray protesters demand water, 11/08/08

River Murray

In addition to doing all it can to improve inflows it is also incumbent upon government to take whatever action is necessary to mitigate the effects of environmental issues such as rising salinity and acid sulphate soils.

A State Liberal Government will:

- Work with Lower Murray irrigators on rehabilitation and rejuvenation of swampland following the drought.
- Support local governments to stabilise crumbling and subsiding river banks.
- Implement an environment flow return policy, with CSIRO advice, and work with the Federal Government to ensure adequate water flow to preserve the freshwater environment in the lower lakes and river below Lock 1.
- Seek more equity in allocations across the MDB and implement a minimum flow and flow return policy that acknowledges the environment is a water user in its own right.

River Murray

Key Issues

Riverland Recovery Fund

Families, businesses and communities in the Riverland are facing extreme hardship. The Rann Labor Government has neglectfully overseen the decline of South Australia's regional food bowl.

Policy responses from Rann Labor to this crisis, overseen by Water Security Minister Karlene Maywald, have been piecemeal at best.

A substantial government response is required to assist riverland communities to rebuild and re-energise after suffering years of diminished and uncertain water allocations, low commodity prices and an inflated Australian dollar.

The State Liberal Party has already pledged over \$40 million per year for the Regional Development Infrastructure Fund. This funding is specifically allocated for the delivery of infrastructure projects, in regional areas, which are capable of delivering long term economic benefit to the local community, and the state.

However, in recognition of the exceptional circumstances faced by river communities:

A State Liberal Government will:

- Establish the Riverland Recovery Fund within the first 100 days of coming to office.
- Commit \$20 million towards the fund over four years.
- Utilise the fund in targeted investments, industry development and community initiatives.

Salinity

A healthy flowing River Murray is integral to salinity control within the river channel.

Salinity is not a new phenomenon. It threatens a large expanse of Australia's cultivated land but is even more serious for river corridor farmers. Falling river levels allow more saline groundwater intrusion into the main river channel and reduced flows are unable to flush it effectively.

This poses a serious threat to all river-based horticulture and viticulture, livestock, native flora and fauna as well as roads, buildings and other infrastructure.⁴

In addition, the proposed weir at Wellington would greatly complicate the flushing of accumulating salinity in the river's lower reaches, from where much of Adelaide's drinking water is drawn, as well as water for irrigators.

⁴ *Directions for Managing Salinity in South Australia*. Government of South Australia (2000). p.2. & *Salinity Explained*, Victorian Department of Sustainability & Development (1999)

River Murray

Underscoring the seriousness of the problem is a suggestion that a desalination plant may be required at Tailem Bend to treat water pumped from the river to supply the upper south east and lakes communities. Becoming perhaps the first country in the world to build a desalination plant on a 'fresh' water river will truly serve as a monument to the failures of the Rann Labor Government.

A State Liberal Government will:

- Support research into the continued development and fine tuning of commercially viable salt-tolerant and water-wise crops and pastures.
- Recognise the important role played by Landcare groups and organisations such as Trees for Life in combating rising salinity levels.
- Work to ensure the delivery of flows adequate to contain or reverse rising salinity levels.

Irrigation

Under the Rann Labor Government, many irrigators have been forced to abandon their plantings and their industry. Due to falling river levels, in some instances, major engineering works have been required for irrigators to even access what remains of their allocations.

Little has been done to assist irrigators, many of whom had planned to work in the industry for the remainder of their lives, to remain in business or to transition to another industry.

Irrigators are entitled to the full support of their government as they battle the effects of drought and mismanagement.

A State Liberal Government will:

- Commit to maintaining Critical Water Allocations for the survival of permanent plantings, at an estimated cost of \$10 million per annum.
- Continue to support River Murray irrigators, who contribute a large percentage of the state's horticultural production.
- Consult urgently with all Riverland, Mid-Murray and Lower Murray communities to plan and assist with the necessary restructuring resulting from the effects of ongoing drought and low river flows.

River Murray

Lower Lakes and Coorong

The River Murray below Lock 1, the Lower Lakes, the Coorong and the Murray Mouth are in a desperate state as a result of decades of over-allocation exacerbated by protracted and severe drought.

The mouth closed over in 1981 for the first time in some 8,000 years,⁵ but the obvious warning went unheeded – since then allocations in upstream states have increased significantly. It has taken a severe drought to drive home that the once mighty river system has been pushed past its limit.

At present we face a situation where South Australia may lose the entire Lower Lakes and Coorong ecosystem forever.

The two most prominent proposals for managing this crisis are the construction of a weir near Wellington and allowing the ingress of seawater into the lakes.

Despite the government's claim that no final decision has been made on whether to proceed with the weir, Rann Labor (via SAWater) has already splashed \$14.4 million on 'preliminary works'.⁶

The State Liberal Party believes a freshwater solution is by far the preferred option for the river and lakes. We oppose both the construction of a weir and allowing seawater into the lakes.

Issues of concern with a 'temporary' weir at Wellington:

- Expense
- Instability of the river bed may undermine effectiveness.
- Damage to the environment - above and below a weir.
- The difficulty of removing the temporary rock wall weir and restoring the natural environment.
- The potential to precipitate unacceptable increases in the salinity of Lock 1-Wellington weir pool (this is already apparent, e.g. salinity has doubled at Murray Bridge⁷).
- Potential, particularly during construction and demolition, to disturb, displace and release thousands of cubic metres of sulphidic river bed soils into the waters above and below the weir.
- Potential breaching of the 1.6km causeway in bad weather allowing seawater(in the event it's been let into the lakes) into the river above the weir.

⁵ The Facts – The Lower Murray, Lakes & Coorong, Lower River Murray Drought Reference Group

⁶ SA Water, PRELIMINARY WORKS FOR TEMPORARY WEIR BELOW WELLINGTON, submitted by to Public Works Committee Nov 2008

⁷ Salinity levels at Murray Bridge has 'doubled', The Advertiser, 07/07/09

River Murray

Issues of concern with allowing the ingress of seawater:

- Tidal flows may be insufficient to maintain a healthy aquatic environment. • River flows, even if restored to normal, will never be able to flush the salt water back out to sea.
- Notable water scientists and experts are opposed to the plan.
- Low outflows at the mouth will necessitate constant, perpetual dredging to keep it open (This has been undertaken for the past seven years due to low flows).

The Rann Labor Government has been glacially slow in finding and developing alternative water sources and has not fought hard enough for South Australia's water rights.

[A State Liberal Government will:](#)

- Undertake works to mitigate environmental damage to the Lower Lakes and Coorong as the drought persists.
- Support the Upper South East REFLOWS project that returns water to the southern basin of the Coorong.

Acid Sulphate Soils

Labor's approach to managing acid sulphate soils in the Lower Lakes makes the wrong assumption that the entire lakebed, once exposed to air and then re-inundated, will become acidified. Acid Sulphate Soils (ASS) outbreaks don't necessarily affect the total area of the lakebed and can be managed on an individual basis.

Allowing seawater into the Lower Lakes' freshwater environment in order to prevent acidification will cause irreversible damage.⁸

While we accept the need to protect the quality supply of water for the consumption of South Australians, we also believe that the survival of the lakes as a freshwater ecosystem is, if at all possible, is a non-negotiable.

Regeneration of vegetation and natural bio-remediation is occurring in many places around the lakes. Localised remedial action, originally proposed by local residents some twelve months before eventual adoption by the government, shows promise and may avert the need to inundate the lakes with seawater – an action viewed by many as ecologically irreversible.

A State Liberal Government will:

- Support the investigation and implementation of all bio-remediation technologies that may be employed to improve the chance and speed of recovery of the Lower Lakes and Coorong.
- Implement methods of treating individual acid sulphate soil outbreaks in isolation, thereby minimising further degradation of the whole Lower Lakes ecosystem.
- Take action to minimise the occurrence of acid sulphate soil in Lake Albert and oppose the proposal to inundate the lake with seawater.
- Support research of practical methods to mitigate acid sulphate soils by natural means such as the propagation of phragmites on shallow and exposed lake and river beds.
- Investigate other ways of supporting lakes communities, which are at risk of losing services and facilities as employment and subsequent economic activity drops.

⁸ Submission to the Senate inquiry Into The Urgent Provision of Water to the Coorong and Lower Lakes, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, September 2008

River Murray

Save the River Murray Levy

The fund was established in 2003 with the objectives stated below, as quoted in the Fund's Financial Report issued annually by the Dept of Water and Land Biodiversity Conservation:

*'The major purpose of The Fund is to provide funds for programmes and measures to improve and promote the environmental health of the River Murray or ensure the adequacy, security and quality of the State's water supply from the River Murray. The Fund contributes to the excess of the State's contribution to the Murray-Darling Basin Commission ...'*⁹

Since its inception, the funds collected have been consistently underspent. With a recurrent appropriation of \$22 million per annum, unspent funds accumulated over the years and at 30 June 2008 totalled \$14.5 million - more than half one year's income.¹⁰

This saving was finally expended during 2008-09 and at 30 June 2009 the fund held only \$1.8 million.

The State Liberal Party supports the aim to 'Save the River Murray' and the part the fund is intended to play in achieving that goal. However, we do question the effectiveness of this measure when fund remains unspent for multiple years whilst languishing in a non-interest bearing account.

With the river and lakes in desperate need, it is unfathomable that these monies are under-utilised.

A State Liberal Government will:

- Ensure the 'Save the River Murray Fund' is fully utilised each year to maximise its value in line with the stated aims of the fund.

⁹ Save the River Murray Fund Annual Report 2003-04, pg 8-9

¹⁰ Save the River Murray Fund Annual Reports 2003-04 to 2008-09

River Murray

Lower Murray Reclaimed Irrigation Area

The Lower Murray Reclaimed Irrigation Area (LMRIA) has traditionally been among the most productive dairy regions of South Australia, at one stage producing up to one third of South Australian dairy production.¹¹

Rehabilitation work and upgrading of irrigation infrastructure, much of which was antiquated, was carried out on swamps in the LMRIA to achieve more efficient use of water allocations, and reduce or eliminate pollution of the River Murray in farmland run-off.

Low river levels have affected some of this completed remediation work and has left banks and levee banks at risk of further deterioration, the effect of which will be most harmful when river levels eventually return to normal.

A State Liberal Government will:

- Work with Lower Murray irrigators on rehabilitation and rejuvenation of swampland following the drought with the intention of bringing swamps back into a productive state.

Printed and authorised by J Sheezel, Liberal Party, 104 Greenhill Rd, Unley 5061

¹¹ Lower Murray Irrigation Advisory Board Submission to the 2002 Assessment for Water Reform, March 2002