

Inaugural National Press Club Luncheon
in Adelaide

The Future of the River Murray

Wednesday February 19, 2003

Premier Mike Rann

Minister for Economic Development

Minister for the Arts

Minister for Volunteers

Welcome to Adelaide and to South Australia.

I'm delighted to see the National Press Club for the first time here in Adelaide.

In 1903, Banjo Patterson published the song which began... and I use Banjo's original version...

"There once was a swagman, camped in a billabong, under the shade of a coolibah tree..."

Of course, it's "Waltzing Matilda".

So much of the meaning of the word "Australian" comes from the landscape, the scraggly trees and Spanish light, the blue remembered hills and unending flat and scrubby desert, the dried up creeks and now and then, a big majestic river.

But a hundred years on... and it's only just a hundred... our mightiest rivers are in the sort of trouble Banjo would never have imagined.

You'd be hard pressed now in certain parts of the Murray to find a billabong to camp by anymore.

And the coolibah, a eucalypt, might soon be going the way of the river red gums, whose giant, upright corpses stand ghostly sentinel all up and down the length of the lower Murray.

And the Murray, for so long Australia's major artery, the jugular vein of the continent, is dying of sclerosis.

Two hundred years ago, the flow through the Murray Mouth at Goolwa was around 11, 000 gicalitres a year.

A gicalitre is roughly the equivalent of one thousand Olympic size swimming pools.

So that's eleven thousand billion litres.

Today, after one hundred years of neglect and abuse, only 3,000 gicalitres flows through the Murray Mouth... if it's open at all.

That means three quarters of the River's natural flow has gone.

It's an understatement to say that the most urgent environmental issue facing this country is restoring the health of the River Murray.

If we continue as we are, this once great River system will be dead within the next one hundred years.

If we do nothing... salinity levels in the Murray Darling Basin will rise by 50% over the next 50 years.

Floodplain and wetlands in South Australia will suffer a 100% increase in salinisation.

And in the next twenty years, Adelaide's water could be unfit for drinking 40% of the time... according to the standards of the World Health Organisation.

That's a frightening prospect for a capital city which relies in large part on the River for its drinking water.

No Australian jurisdiction relies on the River Murray as much as South Australia.

And no State receives poorer quality water from the Murray than South Australia.

I know. My most recent visit to the Murray was in January when I visited Old Clayton on Lake Alexandrina.

The water quality was so bad it was virtually useless... impossible to drink and almost impossible to use to irrigate local vines, orchards and pastures.

At Lake Alexandrina, water levels were at twenty year lows with salinity nearly double World Health Organisations standards.

It was a terrifying glimpse of the future.

And while the drought has worsened the situation, the rot had set in well before.

The River is suffering from:

- increased salinity
- bank erosions
- siltation
- toxic algal blooms
- reduced and altered patterns of flow
- invasions of feral animals and weeds
- and degraded and dying flood plain forests and wetlands.

We must treat this as a national crisis.

This is a massive threat not just to our environment, but to our whole national economy.

The Murray-Darling Basin enriches Australia by an estimated \$23 billion per year.

That's:

- \$10bn in agricultural production
- \$3bn in mining
- \$6.5bn in tourism
- and \$2.8bn in commercial fishing and other industries.

The Murray Darling Basin supports one quarter of the nation's cattle herd, half the sheep flock and half of the cropland.

In South Australia alone, the annual farm gate income is more than \$500 million,

Our multi-billion dollar wine industry relies on the Murray, as does our growing food industry.

We now export almost \$3bn worth of food products all over the world.

The cost of dealing with the salinity at its current levels in the Murray for industrial and urban users is estimated to be \$50m a year.

That figure will only increase as the situation worsens.

This is a State of Emergency.

I have called for a special meeting of COAG or a special Premier's Conference to specifically address the problems of the River Murray... and the health and future of all our natural waterways and water resources.

Today I have written to the Prime Minister and all State premiers on this crisis.

It's a national issue that requires national leadership from our nations leaders.

We have an historic opportunity... with Labor leaders in every State and territory... to work together with the Federal Government on a project of national importance.

It's a battle which must start now... it's one we have to win.

There can be no more alibis and excuses, or even worse, more delays.

Last year the Prime Minister, quite rightly, following the Bali bombing, convened a special COAG meeting where Federal State and territory governments agreed to a national strategy to combat terrorism.

We need to give the same urgency to combating this threat to our children's future.

The nation must be mobilized to a threat that is not a future possibility, but a present reality.

Environment Minister and Minister for the River Murray John Hill and I have also convened a State Forum on this crisis.

Next week, we'll be talking to South Australian State and Federal parliamentarians... from all sides of politics... to consider how we can work together on this crisis.

We want to come out of that Forum with a truly bipartisan position.

We want every South Australian MP, State... and importantly... Federal, to fight for what's best for the long term rehabilitation of the River.

I do not believe that will be difficult to achieve.

Several years ago a Select Committee comprised of Liberal, Labor, Independent and National MPs came up with a unanimous, bipartisan resolution.

We want to put forward a single, bipartisan position from South Australia to take to the Murray-Darling Ministerial Council, which will meet in October.

One thing we all agree on is that the River must have more water, exactly how much will be the point of negotiation.

This is the year for courageous action to save the River because our ecosystem is perilously close to permanent collapse.

Three million Australians rely on the River for drinking water, that's almost as many people as live in Naples, or Vancouver or the whole of Melbourne.

The waterways of the Murray Darling Basin are seriously low and saline and water reserves are at an all time low.

A year ago the storages were half full. Today they are three quarters empty.

In some places, like the Hume Dam and the Menindee Lakes, water levels are at just 5% of capacity.

In addition to low flows and low reserves... the River's barrages have been closed at the Mouth since December 2001 to stop water discharging into the ocean.

They're expected to remain closed until at least 2004 .

The river has not flowed to the sea for more than a year... and is not expected to flow again for about nineteen months.

During the past 105 years, the worst droughts on record have involved five months where there's been no flow to the sea.

We are now likely to have almost three years without flow.

The current drought in rainfall follows a much longer drought in river flow.

While the former may be regarded as an act of nature, the latter is very much an act of humanity.

We must not let the current drought blind us to the real issue of long term river health.

The drought cannot be used as an excuse.

Two above average winters will not fix the problems of the Murray.

There is now no argument that the use of water from the River is causing real impacts on the health of the system.

Each year South Australia extracts around 650 gigalitres from the river system.

New South Wales takes nine times that amount or 6 000 gigalitres a year.

Victoria extracts 3 400, and Queensland around 600 gigalitres.

It's clear that too much water is taken from the River for unsustainable and inefficient uses.

Clearly, Australians must move away from the inefficient use of water... both in terms of wastage of the water itself, and low returns for the water used.

For example it takes 7,500 litres of water to produce \$1 worth of rice in the field.

In comparison, it takes 680 litres of water to produce one dollar's worth of wine... that's less than one tenth of the water it takes to produce rice.

In South Australia, our highly lucrative fruit and vegetable sector uses just one hundred litres for \$1 of produce.

If we let this go on, it will begin to hit the economic sustainability of the very communities and industries that depend on the water resource.

We must look to reduce these impacts for the future.

We need to see more efficient use of this water.

In April 2002, some of the very best river ecology scientists in the world addressed the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council.

They said that if we want even a moderate chance of seeing a healthy, working river system, we'll need an extra annual flow in the Lower Murray of at least 1630 gigalitres.

At the end of the day, we simply need to stop taking so much water out of the Murray-Darling Basin.

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council will meet in May and again in October this year.

It will be making a decision on restoring up to 1500 gigalitres of flow to the Murray.

We want to go further.

South Australia wants to see an extra flow of 2000 gigalitres a year, at and below the junction of the Murray and the Darling at Wentworth in New South Wales.

That must be the target for recovery over the next fifteen or even twenty years.

We can't fix a century of damage overnight.

But we accept we have to start cleaning up our own act.

And in the past eleven and a half months... since we formed government, we've been doing it.

We've introduced groundbreaking legislation...the River Murray Bill... which will give the State Government sweeping powers to limit activities that damage the Murray.

This is the first time in Australia's history that the River will be given special protection under its own legislation.

And also for the first time in Australia, we have a Minister... in John Hill... with specific responsibility for the River Murray.

We have in place a multi-million dollar restructuring of the dairy industry in the lower Murray.

We're spending \$30m to cut the amount of effluent from dairy farms entering the River.

This is a prime example of environmental abuse.

Flood irrigation washes fertilizer and manure back into the river, treating it like a giant sewer.

We're also tackling salinity and introducing water allocation plans.

As we speak, emergency dredging is underway, removing 2,000 cubic metres of sand every day to try and keep the Mouth open and maintain the health of the Coorong, a unique, world class eco-system.

While it's an interim measure, it's vital if we are to ensure the Mouth doesn't close for the first time since 1981.

Just last week, John Hill and I announced a plan to waterproof Adelaide, to cut our reliance on the Murray.

We want to find ways to use the billions of litres of stormwater that falls across Adelaide each year which we let run out to sea.

In any ordinary year, 130 gegalitres of stormwater and treated effluent is discharged into the Gulf St Vincent from Adelaide.

That's a lot of water – remember, a gegalitre is one thousand Olympic swimming pools worth.

On average, Adelaide uses 200 gegalitres of mains treated water, and about 80 to 90% comes from the Murray in very dry years, like this one.

So it makes absolute sense to be using more of our stormwater rather than drawing it from the Murray.

There are innovative ways we can make use of storm water - before it pours into our stormwater drains, carrying with it silt, pollutants, organic waste and rubbish, and then disgorges into the marine environment.

Over the next two years we intend to spend \$1.8 million investigating how the city can better manage its water over the next 20 years.

We also want to hear the ideas of people in the community.

We'll be looking at using artificial wetlands, underground aquifers and re-using treated sewage.

And under our Water Allocation Plan, irrigators will be more accountable for the water they use and the environmental impact of their farming activities.

Just yesterday, John Hill announced that the State Government has adopted a new Licensed Water Use Metering Policy.

For the first time... water use by all South Australian irrigators in prescribed areas will be monitored by volume.

Metering clearly quantifies water use before and after any water saving initiatives are implemented.

This provides a real incentive to irrigators who put in place water saving initiatives.

I want the special COAG I've suggested today to give us the opportunity to come up with a negotiated position.

Not a State's plan. Not a Commonwealth plan... a national plan we can all sign up to.

I believe we've seen the beginnings of a new era of cooperation between the States, and it doesn't hurt that we are all on the same side of the political fence.

Early last year, Victorian Premier Steve Bracks and I forged a new partnership to help restore the health of the River.

We announced the formation of a River Murray Environmental Flows Fund which will deliver up to an extra 30 gigalitres of annual water flow down the River.

A small, but significant step towards greater co-operation.

And we have pledged to work together to improve the salinity and water quality of the River.

Restoring the River Murray is not just a poetic imperative, not just a way of improving the view for people who live by it... or want to have it back the way it was when they were young.

Restoring the Murray is the most important national task we have.

And it is no less than we as South Australians deserve.

It's a job for all of us... governments, irrigators, environmentalists and the community.

We need to come together for the future of our most important resource – water.

Although the problems are large and complex they are well understood by most Australians.

There is a national consciousness about repairing the River Murray.

Over a century ago our country was federated around states' with prosperous farming economies.

We ended that century a very different Australia – but our love for the land endures.

The task for this first decade of the century is to renew our nation's ecosystem.

And that can only be achieved with a healthy river.

For the sake of our farmers, our regions, our flora and fauna, my city of Adelaide, and all Australians... we must give new life to the Murray.

Let us recognise that South Australia is an equal partner in our Federation.

And socially, culturally and economically, the people of South Australia have made major contributions to this country.

South Australia started out as a colony of free settlers.

We were the first State to give women the vote and the first place in the world to give women the right to stand for Parliament.

We were the first State to outlaw racial discrimination and to legislate for equality of opportunity.

We were the first State to pass historic laws that gave Aboriginal people inalienable title to their lands.

In 1876, we were the first territory of the British Empire, other than Britain, to legalise trade unions.

But we are not resting on our laurels.

I want this term of our government to be valued for our environmental commitment.

In just one year:

- we've stepped up the fight for the Murray
- we've doubled fines for polluters
- we're continuing to fight a national low-level nuclear waste dump
- we've beefed up the powers of the Environment Protection Authority
- we've backed the Kyoto Protocol
- we've announced our One Million Trees Program to grow a series of urban forests
- our *Native Vegetation Act* formally ends broadacre clearance in South Australia and will encourage revegetation
- we've adopted a No Species Loss Strategy
- and we've established the Youth Conservation Corp, which will see groups of young people involved in reforestation projects throughout the State, including along the River Murray.

Wouldn't it be great to see a plan for a River Murray Forest?

We've also working to make Adelaide a Green City... and we're harnessing sustainable energy, like wind power, to boost our energy supply.

Our environmental credentials are strong and we deserve, we seriously deserve, to be heard on the River Murray.

We believe we have earned the right to sit at the table with the Prime Minister and the other Premiers and have our case taken seriously.

And if I may once again quote Banjo Patterson...

During the Great War he wrote a poem about another battle in another time, about the need for people all over the country to fight for the common good.

I think the sentiments reflect the urgency of what we must do together in this century for the River Murray.

He wrote,

“The old State jealousies of yore
Are dead as Pharaoh's sow,
We're not State children anymore
We're all Australians now!”

Thank you.