

DR JOHN KENIRY AM

Former Commissioner Natural Resources NSW

Reflections on Water Sharing in the Murray Darling Basin

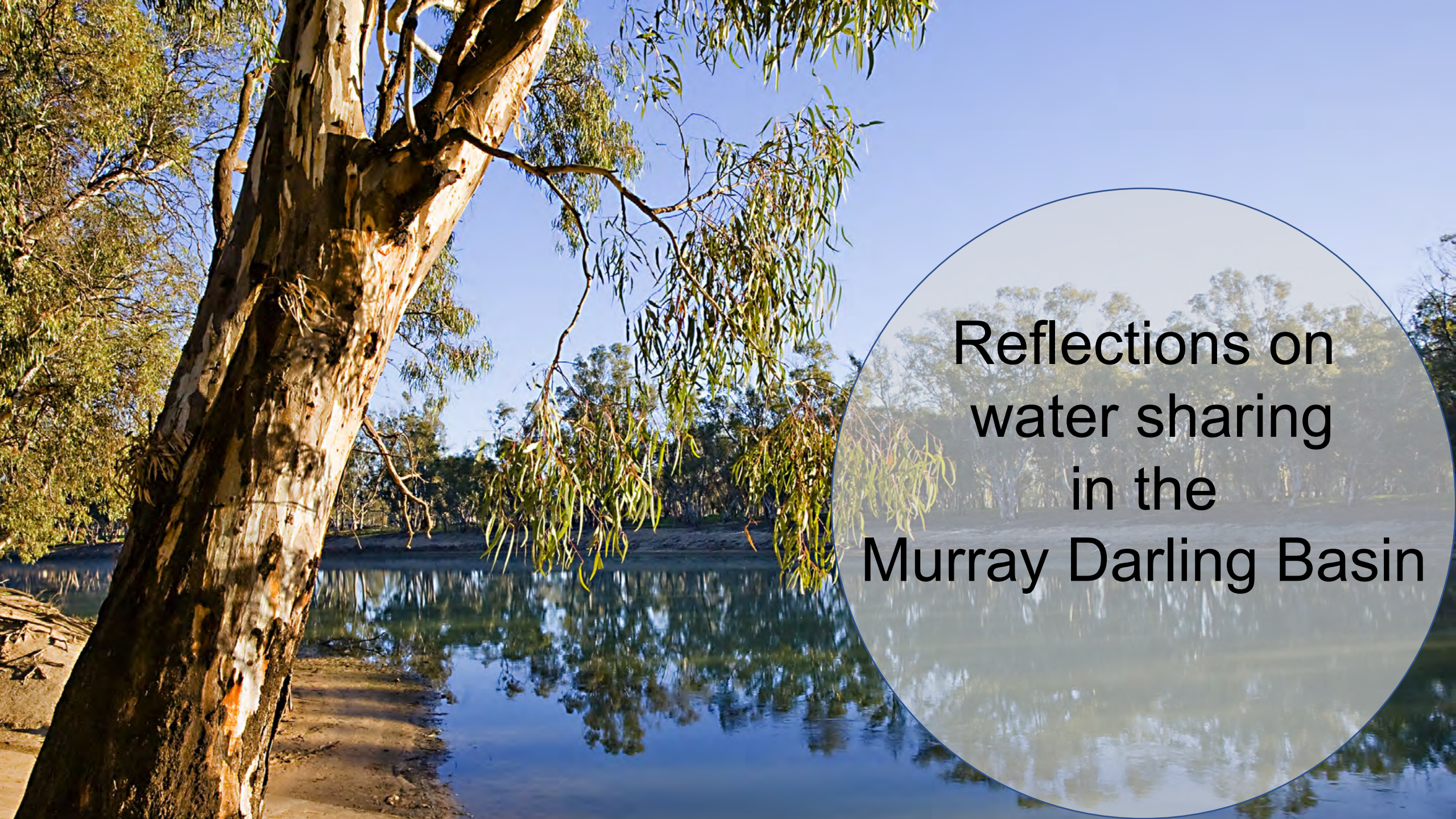


Dr Keniry stated that his presentation was based on his personal views developed over sixty years involvement in Australian agriculture and they should not be taken to represent the views of any State or Commonwealth Government.

He emphasised the importance of the Murray Darling Basin. In area it extends North beyond Charleville in Queensland and South beyond Bendigo. It produces more than one third of Australia's agricultural produce and has 16 Internationally important wetlands. The basin is divided into two areas, North and South roughly along a line from Cowra to Broken Hill.

Dr Keniry then set out the history of how the current situation has emerged, irrigation started in the 1930s, grew rapidly after 1960s and now uses more water than 14 Sydney Harbours. Initial overallocation of entitlements, reduced flows into the Northern rivers when Queensland developed its own industry and flood plain harvesting, have all contributed to the current crisis. Tradable rights were introduced, exacerbating the situation along with flood plain harvesting and A-class licenses modified to facilitate increased extraction at low flows.

Dr Keniry felt that the Northern Basin rivers and the species that depend on them have been short changed. He cited opportunities for improvements, by reducing focus on average extraction, instead focusing on where water is taken and when, and protecting low flows, including buying back licenses that apply in times of low flows. However vested interests make progress difficult.

A scenic view of a riverbank. In the foreground on the left, a large, weathered tree trunk with peeling bark leans towards the water. The river is calm, reflecting the surrounding greenery and the clear blue sky. In the background, a dense line of trees borders the water. A large, semi-transparent circular overlay is positioned on the right side of the image, containing the title text.

**Reflections on
water sharing
in the
Murray Darling Basin**

Disclaimer

The views I express today are my personal views, developed over sixty years involvement in Australian agriculture.

They should not be taken to represent the views of any State or Commonwealth Government



- Capital city
- Main town
- Main rivers
- - - State border
- Murray-Darling Basin

Sources:
 » Geoscience Australia
 » Murray-Darling Basin Authority



Murray Darling Basin

Key statistics

- Over 1 billion sq km area
- 77,000 km of rivers
- 2.6 million people
- Over 40 Aboriginal nations
- Agricultural output \$24 billion (35% nat'l)
- Environmentally significant, including 16 RAMSAR wetlands



Development of farming in the MDB

- Dryland farming, both cropping and grazing, accounts for majority of land used for agriculture
- Irrigation started in the 1930's and grew rapidly from the 1960's
- 2017-2018: 1.5 million ha irrigated on 9000 farms
 - Used 7 million ML of water(14 Sydarbs)
 - Used 70% of all irrigation water in Australian agriculture
- Its all about water



Water sharing in New South Wales

Regulated by the Water Management Act 2000 and 58 Water Sharing Plans

The Act sets priorities among the users:


1. Protect the water source and its dependent ecosystems
2. Protect basic landholder rights (stock and domestic)
3. Consumptive uses, including for towns, irrigators and mining

Sharing under 3, or any lower priority use must not prejudice rights under 1 and 2.

Locally, through 58 Water Sharing Plans

The Commonwealth also intervenes through the MDB Authority

There is ample media and other evidence that all is not well



A short history of irrigation development in NSW

- Interest in irrigation commenced in the Federation drought and led to many dams from 1930's onwards
- Water licenses were issued to dryland farmers but not always used (sleepers and dosers)
- Dams were over-allocated, but not over-used
- Flow in NSW north west rivers were supplemented by inflows from Queensland until...
 - Queensland developed its own industry and reduced inflows to NSW



- Tradeable water rights were introduced and sleeper and doser licenses were activated
- Flood plain harvesting in NSW and Queensland
- Finally, A-Class licenses were modified to facilitate increased extraction at low flows





We have
short changed
our Northern
Basin rivers and
the species that
depend on them

What next?

1. Reduce focus on how much water is extracted on average
2. Focus on where it is taken and when
3. Much greater emphasis on protecting low flows
4. More rain, more regularly (ha! ha!)
5. Buy back extraction licenses that apply in times of low flows



We have short
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What next?

6. Sort out rights to extract environmental flows
7. Sensible incentives to improve irrigation efficiency
8. Reduce evaporation from surface of on-farm storages
9. Deepen on-farm storages
10. Build more dams to collect high flows
11. Establish a Royal Commission with a genuine commitment to fix it