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Mr Ian Dundas
Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2000

Secretary: *Allen*

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES
AND FORESTRY

Dear Mr Dundas,

Re: submission to the Inquiry into Future Water Supplies for Australia's Rural Industries and Communities.

The National Land and Water Resources Audit of the Natural Heritage Trust recently released the *Australian Water Resources Assessment 2000*. The assessment discloses a very disturbing trend in water use across Australia.

Mean annual water use in Australia increased from 14600 ML in 1983/84 to 24 058 ML in 1996/97. This equates to a 65 percent increase in water use in a little over ten years. The major category of water use is irrigation. Mean annual water use by irrigation increased from 10200 ML in 1983/84 to 17 935 ML in 1996/97. This equates to a 76 percent increase in irrigation mean water use across Australia in just over ten years. In 1997/97, irrigation comprised 75% of mean water use throughout Australia.

Irrespective of the volumes of available water across Australia, a 65 percent increase in water use every decade cannot be sustained indefinitely. Nor can a 76 percent increase in irrigation water use be sustained every decade. Current water use trends and the industries behind these trends are unsustainable. Water efficiency and conservation measures, particularly in irrigation, can reduce water use at the margin. Yet, the trend in water use shows clearly that the issue is the growth in total volumes used. The growth in total volumes used will not and cannot be brought back to sustainable levels through water conservation measures alone. Introducing markets for water "rights" or searching for alternative supplies do not address nor reflect an understanding of the fundamental issue of continued growth in total volumes used.

Sustainable use of Australia's available water requires far reaching directions than mere water conservation measures. Such directions must include curbing further irrigation agricultural development, particularly in inland Australia. This can be achieved through the various state governments declaring new irrigated agriculture enterprises prohibited development. The state governments must also identify sustainable agricultural industries and declare them allowable developments. Such measures are drastic. Yet, these are the only measure that will prevent seriously the water shortages and the consequent conflicts that are inevitable if the current trends in water use continue. The water conflicts of the Middle East and the US for example demonstrate what Australia will confront in the near future. Do we look to follow the same path?

The Inquiry must make recommendations such as those proposed that curtail dramatically the continued growth in water use. Only will such recommendations prevent seriously future water shortages that will be the inevitable consequence of our current trends in water use. I look forward to hearing of the Inquiry's draft and final reports.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Allen
Dr Stephen Allen