

Monday 12 April 2021

*Hon. Michael Gunner MLA
Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister For Territory Economic Reconstruction
Parliament House, Darwin NT 0800*

Dear Chief Minister,

I write to you from Tolarno Station, one of NSW's biggest farms, with a warning to not allow big agribusiness to take a foothold in the Northern Territory, and impact the wonderful river systems that make the Top End so special.

I've seen first-hand the devastating impacts of large-scale irrigation on a river system. In 2019 I found myself standing knee-deep in a shrinking stagnant pool left in the deep dry trough of the once-mighty Darling (Barka), with a giant dead Murray Cod in my arms, thousands more dying fish flailing around me in the cracking mud.

An estimated one million fish died in our rivers as drought-reduced river flows were exacerbated by water taken by upstream irrigators, political mismanagement of water allocation to farmers and poor enforcement of water regulations. The majestic Murray Cod I held in my hands were in the vicinity of 80 to 100 years old - the disastrous consequence of not a lack of rain or drought, but deeply failed water policy.

The mass fish death of 2019 should have been the circuit breaker we needed to snap into action to save the Murray-Darling, but unfortunately that has not been the case. In February 2020, a huge volume of rain fell in southern Queensland - a deluge that should have led to a flood in the Lower Darling. This natural river flow should spread out across this expansive floodplain area, turning Tolarno's grey soils green for months.

Instead all we got was a little flow that hardly came up the banks. 80 percent of this flood event was cut off and stolen by the cotton industry upstream into private farm dams – most of them built and paid for by taxpayers using \$6 billion of public funding under the Murray Darling Basin Plan that was supposed to be used to return more, not less, water to the river.

The cotton growers who operate in the northern Murray-Darling Basin are cowboys with no regard for anyone but their own self-interests. The cotton industry is a minnow in terms of its size and local employment numbers yet it has got control and is taking so much water upstream that it is destroying the river system.

As big cotton players eye off the North, they will be quick to offer assurances of sustainability, industry investment, water allocation caps and other quick fixes. But the experience of those of us on the frontline of the Murray-Darling can attest that these are no more than hollow promises to get a foot in the door. Do not risk the devastating impacts to fish stocks, the natural environment, local communities and existing agricultural industries on the promises of Big Cotton.

It may be too late to save the mighty Murray-Darling system, but I urge your government to heed this warning and not allow the same thing to happen to the rivers of the Northern Territory.

Thank you

Rob McBride
Tolarno Station, NSW