My name is Phill O'Neill and I am the manager and operator of a family dairy farm of 600 cows on the Murray River at Barham NSW. I have lived on the Murray River (within 60 metres) all of my 57 years of life. A large part of my dairy farm has frontage to the Murray River. As my life and livelihood have been centred around the Murray River, I consider myself to have an excellent knowledge of River patterns (including past flood events and dry spells). More importantly, I also have a strong appreciation of the local environment and am currently the Chairman of the Western Murray Land Improvement Group. As a former councillor with the Wakool Shire (8 Years) it concerns me greatly where our economic future here lies. I despair at decisions being made in relation to the management of water in the Murray River and in particular, at the lack of consideration given to local knowledge in the development of the Murray Darling Basin Plan. In particular, I worry about the future of farming in our region and the state of our local environment into the future.

In my opinion, there are many issues around the overall intentions of the Murray Darling Basin Plan, however this submission will mainly outline issues that I see directly affecting my area of the Wakool Shire.

The Shire of Wakool is situated on a convergence of rivers, creeks and ephemeral streams which wind their way across the flood plain. 90% of land in the shire is privately owned. We have large areas of river red gums both on private and public land. Broader areas grow black box trees (generally on higher ground) with a range of native shrubs and grasses.

Development in our area has been specifically based on irrigation, for predominately rice growing, pasture for dairy, fat lambs, cattle cereal crops and a variety of horticulture (to a lesser extent).

The Wakool Shire has now lost in excess of 50% of its irrigation water. The removal of this water has had a profound effect not only on agriculture in our region but also our small businesses, schools and community groups.

The local environment has also been negatively affected as the value of water is now so high that farmers cannot afford to let water onto those environmental areas on the farm that used to benefit from run off, storage and delivery of water. There is simply no run off.

Water storages are generally kept empty, or as near as possible to empty to save evaporation, leaking delivery channels that used to provide mini wet lands and in-stream habitats are piped or just kept dry. The basin plan never at any stage (or not to any extent) looked at the benefits to the environment of irrigation water, and more particularly irrigation water used on a floodplain that excludes over bank events from large areas with the erection of levees.

Our own experience on one of our properties was to pipe 2 km of leaky channel, from the river to our irrigation farm. For years this channel leaked and blew out and was an absolute waste of irrigation water, however a wonderful bonus to the local environment. Now the trees, the wetlands and wildlife that once flourished in this area have moved on. The random losses of water which occurred in hundreds of irrigation systems across the Riverina and deemed as inefficient are now replaced by plastic lined channels and piped channels. Our gravity irrigation system is now pumped through miles of plastic pipe burning up energy with increased maintenance costs and reduced opportunity for positive on-farm environmental outcomes.

Historically, the development of irrigation land in our area involved the clearing of native vegetation and grasses. Without water our land is even less productive than it was prior to irrigation. Large areas of land have become redundant and infested with weeds such as rolly polly, Barley grass etc .

The question I ask is if we are going to irrigate, then why not irrigate on a flood plain? The characteristics of a flood plain make it well suited to irrigation. It has built natural features for drainage and it is an efficient gravity operated irrigation scheme using little energy. In many ways irrigation has replaced natural flood events by providing the habitat for an enormous range of flora and fauna.

Being on a major flood plain, the Wakool Shire has had many levees constructed around towns, farms and forest areas over time to keep water either in or out. These levees have had a significant effect on the local environment as well. For example every major flood since 1956 has reached a higher and higher level both on the river and out in the forest with the overall volume of water being less. The levees restrict the natural flood. Prior to European settlement, the forest was an open woodland with 8-10 trees to the acre. Today, due to the decline in timber harvesting. The forest is in the order of 200 trees to the acre and the trees are growing on higher and higher ground (outside their natural range), so when we have a sustained dry spell these trees start to die. The proposed amount of water to irrigate the forest is ridiculous. More minor flows filling the swamps creeks and wetlands (the low lying areas) is all that should ever be provided in dry times.

Our Shire has been affected two-fold in that the flood banks restrict the outcomes of over bank events and now water used for irrigation within the flood banks has been removed by 50%. This combined effect has led to anecdotal evidence of bird species decline such as the Ibis at the Kerang rookery etc. Our stretch of the Murray River now runs at much higher flows for longer without any flooding in the Shire. The water is presumably going to the Lower Lake to keep an estuarine lake full of fresh water. This error must be addressed as it is singularly the most controversial part of the plan. The fact that almost the equivalent of Lake Hume storage is lost to sea or evaporates in this area every year is a massive waste of water and completely absurd.

A halt must be put on any further buy backs of water until a delivery plan for the water is agreed to. Part of that plan should be to give an environmental allocation to those now dry farms who would benefit environmentally from that allocation. The delivery mechanisms are in place and some great outcomes could be achieved without too much interference to neighbours Also the Plan needs to provide the flexibility for environmental water held in the irrigation dams to be at times sold and allocated to irrigators in certain circumstances.