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CONSERVATION COUNCIL
ACT REGION



Queensland
Conservation

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull MP
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

1 August 2017

Dear Prime Minister,

The Conservation Councils of South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, ACT and Queensland are the states' peak environment groups representing over 350 members and 200,000 supporters across our states and Territory. Together we are committed to protecting and conserving the wildlife, landscapes and natural resources of Australia. We are very concerned that the decision-making and management of water in the Murray-Darling Basin, particularly the implementation of the Basin Plan, has fallen into the hands of vested interests.

This issue was revealed in the recent ABC Four Corners programme aired on Monday 24 July, *'Pumped – Who is benefitting from the millions spent on the Murray Darling?'*

Your announcement on Sunday 30 July that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) will lead an independent review into the allegations made in the programme is seriously compromised. The MDBA is the body that has to accredit water resource plans, including in the Barwon-Darling, against Basin Plan requirements, and it is in negotiation with various jurisdictions over the proposed 'toolkit' measures as part of the Northern Basin Plan review. It cannot bring an outside perspective to the review.

In addition, the current and proposed membership of the MDBA board, under the watch of Minister for Agriculture and Water, Barnaby Joyce, is not a balanced representation of expertise and interests.

The appointment of Susan Madden to the MDBA Board in March 2016 influenced the outcome of the Northern Basin Review. Ms Madden was previously the executive officer of Macquarie Food & Fibre, a vocal and influential irrigator group in the Northern Basin. Board member George Warne also has a strong background in the irrigation industry, as does the MDBA CEO, Phillip Glyde, and Chair, Neil Andrew.

Recent nominations to the MDBA Board further entrench this bias. The proposal to replace retiring Board members Diane Davidson and Prof Barry Hart with Perrin Davey, recently from the National Irrigators Council, and water engineer Graham Turner will remove the remaining spread of skills and further compromise any sense of the MDBA being an 'independent' body. The Board will be without ecological, governance and indigenous expertise, as required by the Commonwealth Water Act.

Conservation groups have had very limited engagement with the MDBA Board during the implementation phase of the Basin Plan and correspondence on various issues has not received acknowledgement or reply. This is in contrast to access provided to irrigator groups.

The close relationship of the National Party with the irrigation industry is a key concern for us. This relationship was exposed by recent public comments made by Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce in response to the Four Corners programme.

The Conservation Councils are calling for a judicial inquiry into the water management in the Murray-Darling Basin and implementation of the Basin Plan, with the ability to call witnesses and provide protection for whistle blowers. We also call for the water portfolio to be removed from the National Party both federally and in NSW while they continue to demonstrate disregard for both the health of our rivers and the integrity of the Basin Plan.

Please do not hesitate to contact Kate Smolski on (02) 9516 1488 or ncc@nature.org.au to discuss the content of this letter further.

Sincerely,



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