

6th June 2007 speech by Mayor at NSW Shires Conference opposing to proposals to further investigate diverting Clarence and coastal rivers to western New South Wales.

I speak in opposition to Conference business paper motions 47 and 48.

Coastal communities have much empathy for people experiencing severe drought in western NSW. However, we assert that diversion of the Clarence or coastal rivers cannot provide a sustainable solution.

Almost every time drought has hit inland NSW over the past 80 years, since Mr. Bradfield, of Sydney Harbour Bridge fame, first mooted Clarence diversion as a possibility around 1930, the same strident calls are made to turn the Clarence and other rivers inland.

In May 1968 State Minister for Conservation Jack Beale announced an investigation into using the total resources of the Clarence River Valley. His plan, which went nowhere, was remarkably similar to the recent diversion proposal of Federal Minister Turnbull.

In 1995 Watering Australia Foundation (Ernie Bridge and others) promoted a motion to that year's Shires' Conference in almost identical terms to motion 48 today. At that time western Councils helped defeat that ill-conceived motion.

Many conference delegates have driven over the Grafton or Harwood Bridge and seen vast expanses of Clarence River water. What people do not realize is that the water is salt; the river is tidal for almost one hundred kilometers up the estuary. Right now the Clarence and its tributaries from Copmanhurst where fresh water commences have virtually stopped flowing despite one of the best seasons in living memory. There has been no major fresh in the Clarence since the March 2001 flood event.

Motions 47 and 48 attempt to fly in the face of Shires' Association policy adopted over the years such as:-

- (a) The environment, where our Association is committed to protecting and enhancing the natural environment.
- (b) Total catchment management, where this Association supports management of land and water resources on a water catchment basis.
- (c) Water conservation, where we support and encourage conservation of water, use of water efficient appliances and fittings, rainwater tanks and water pricing to encourage water conservation.
- (d) Ecologically Sustainable Development principles are supported by this Association as are the precautionary principle and inter-generational equity.
- (e) The Association supports as policy, general water principles such as setting of water quality and river flow objectives, development of innovative and cost effective water collection as well as recycling and re-use schemes.
- (f) Integrated water cycle management is strongly endorsed in Association's policy and it supports the State government's Healthy Rivers initiatives.

Environmental importance is not just about the residents of the Clarence Valley or even the residents of coastal regions. All residents and all councils of the State should take an interest in not interfering with the environment to the extent contemplated by this river diversion proposal.

The people of Clarence see themselves as guardians of the catchments water and as local custodians of a vital local resource and oppose any interference with the river. Environmental impacts from any diversion would be of great magnitude and unsustainable. Environmental health of the largest river on the biggest flood plain in eastern Australia is of paramount importance.

The prawn-trawling industry relies on 'freshes' in the river to trigger spawning runs. As these freshes would become less frequent, the multi-million dollar industry and about 500 jobs would be jeopardized. Similarly, many freshwater fish species such as the Australian Bass and the endangered Eastern Freshwater Cod rely on large water flows to trigger spawning runs. The reduction of flows is likely to severely impact fish populations, and adversely influence commercial and recreational fishing. Fish diseases such as red Spot appear to be related to poor water quality. Reduction of flows will further concentrate pollution and increase these problems.

The river's complex ecology should not be subjected to the blocking of water and sedimentary flows. Our river needs natural flow fluctuations. It needs floods to provide nutrients on the flood plain and nutrients to the ocean to benefit fisheries and the marine habitat. Temperature and salinity levels can destroy aquatic plants that provide feed and habitat for a multitude of vertebrate and invertebrate species that are vital components in the food chain.

River water belongs to the land through which it flows and is held in trust by local communities for future generations. Water of the Northern Rivers is a resource for its catchments, for its environment and for its ecology and for growing our region. It is part of our brand, a key to our image and our future as a great place to live and as the cornerstone to our tourism and agriculture. If we give it away it will haunt us forever.

Ian Tiley
Mayor Clarence Valley Council