



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**BILLS**

**Export Control Amendment (Banning Cotton  
Exports to Ensure Water Security) Bill 2019**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 18 February 2019**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

<p><b>Date</b> Monday, 18 February 2019  <b>Page</b> 61  <b>Questioner</b>  <b>Speaker</b> Sharkie, Rebekha, MP</p>	<p><b>Source</b> House  <b>Proof</b> Yes  <b>Responder</b>  <b>Question No.</b></p>
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Ms SHARKIE (Mayo) (11:20): I move:

That this bill now be read a second time.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan is our greatest river system in Australia and it is in crisis. The river and its communities remember the social, economic and environmental devastation brought by the millennium drought. We fear the next time the drought stalks the lower basin, the river will not be healthy enough to survive and our beautiful lakes, river and Coorong will be left to die.

Now it's the Menindee Lakes. Up to one million fish are dead, and the community there is angry and suffering, wondering how this happened to them. Grasp the magnitude of it for a moment, if you will: one million dead fish, many of them 70- and 80-year-old cod.

Let no-one pretend that we could not see the slow death of the Murray-Darling coming for us. Climate change is upon us and making our continent drier. Upstream river towns are on water restrictions. We are drawing too much water from the river system, and we need to set new, more realistic and sustainable targets. I represent the downstream hostages of the upstream water theft and corruption. If we do not act now, our river will die. Then there will be no water for anyone, not even the big irrigators with all their paid-up political connections.

South Australia wants the Murray-Darling Basin Plan to endure, but the plan shouldn't be chipped away, with no regard to science, purely for political expediency. South Australia and my electorate have the most vulnerable part of the river. We have so much to lose. Our nation has so much to lose.

The South Australian Liberal Party, who I once believed was a champion for rural and regional South Australia, is silent over this—silent over the actions of their eastern state colleagues. There has been no serious or state government response to the recent report of the South Australian Murray Darling Royal Commission. That is criminal. We need action.

But, without action, we have this bill, the Export Control Amendment (Banning Cotton Exports to Ensure Water Security) Bill 2019. This bill suggests one possible drastic step that we may need to consider; namely, banning the export of cotton—that thirsty Australian mega-crop, cotton. The role of cotton production in the Murray-Darling Basin cannot be ignored. We are effectively exporting the driest continent's most precious resource—water. Although radical, this bill seeks to open a conversation about the future of water usage in the basin.

The overwhelming majority of Australian cotton is grown in the Murray-Darling Basin and approximately 90 per cent of cotton grown in Australia is exported, mainly to China and India, for value-adding. It is not value-added here.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 21.4 per cent of the Murray-Darling Basin irrigation water was used in cotton production in 2005-06. In 2008-09 the ABS reported that cotton accounted for the highest proportion of irrigated water used in the Murray-Darling Basin, 23 per cent—exceeding that used for general crops, which was 20 per cent, and for pasture and grazing, which was 15 per cent. In 2010-11, the ABS further reported that:

The largest volume of irrigation water was applied to cotton, which used 1,882 gigalitres, or 28 per cent of the national irrigation total for that year.

In the Murray-Darling Basin, cotton accounted for the largest area of irrigated land, with 332,000 hectares, or 28 per cent of the total irrigated land in the Murray-Darling Basin.

Cotton is certainly king in that part of the basin. It further reported:

Cotton used the largest volume of irrigation water in the Murray-Darling Basin, with 1,789 gigalitres being applied, which represented nearly 40 per cent of all the irrigated water use in 2010-11. For 2011-12, the ABS reported that 1,996 gigalitres applied to cotton production in the Murray-Darling Basin and was nearly one-third, 32 per cent, of all water usage in the basin that year. As you can see, Mr Acting Deputy Speaker Mitchell, this is a growing problem. Interestingly, the most recent ABS report, for 2016-17, does not provide figures for agricultural water use in the Murray-Darling Basin, although it has figures for national volumes. In 2016-17, cotton used 2,566 gigalitres of water, 28.2 per cent of the allocation.

Given that there is hardly any cotton grown outside the Murray-Darling Basin, the percentage of water used for cotton production in the basin is likely to be considerably higher. Cotton is the single-largest piece of the challenge in managing the water resources of the Murray-Darling Basin. And although the royal commission report does not single out cotton, in the absence of Commonwealth, state and territory government commitments to fully implement the commission's recommendations that is precisely what must be done in Australia's national interests and for the health of our rivers if they do not implement the recommendations. As I said, we are desperate. We want action, and the first action must be for the findings of Bret Walker SC's royal commission to be implemented.

I might go to the work of Maryanne Slattery from the Australia Institute. In January this year she presented her findings in the report, *A fish kill QandA: the questions, answers and dead fish in the Menindee Lakes*. She said:

Q: Where to from here?

A: There should be an urgent public assessment of:

1. Whether the level of extraction in the Northern Basin is sustainable, particularly with respect to floodplain harvesting.
2. How to manage Menindee lakes in a future with less inflows in the small to medium flow range?
3. If the past practice of managing lakes to minimise evaporation still relevant if the lakes will dry more often and require more water to refill?

Finally, transparency and accountability is required if there is any chance for governments and water agencies to restore confidence in the implementation of the Basin Plan: ...

Her findings were:

1. All decisions of the Basin Officials Committee should be made public;
2. The annual reviews of the River Murray Operations by the Independent River Operations Review Group should be made public;
3. The annual reports of the River Murray Operations by the River Murray Operations should be made public;
4. The size and location of all private storages in the Northern Basin should be made public, along with actual storage levels; and
5. A genuinely independent assessment and quantification of the causes of the reduction on low and medium flows in the Barwon-Darling should be completed as soon as possible and made publicly available.

The secrecy around the whole Murray-Darling Basin Plan is terrifying, it really is.

Centre Alliance's firm view is that significant changes need to be made so that the environmental health of the river system with respect to water and food security must be our national priority. It is regrettable that we should have to consider such a measure in the absence of real commitments to implement the royal commission's recommendations and put the health of the Murray-Darling first and foremost. This is something that must be considered in Australia's national interest.

My mother is a wise woman. When I was a child, she would say to me, 'There is enough for every man's need, but not for every man's greed.' And there is no truer example of this than the overallocation of the Murray-Darling and the wilful neglect and turning away by various state and federal governments. I commend this bill to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER ( Mr Goodenough ): Is the motion seconded?

**Mr Wilkie:** I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Debate adjourned.