Fish kills highlight mismanagement of Australian waterways

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The recent discovery of hundreds of thousands of dead fish in far-western New South Wales (NSW) has prompted renewed questions about the management of Australia's scarce water resources.

The fish were found at Menindee Lakes, which is part of the Murray-Darling Basin, Australia's largest river system.

Spanning more than one million square kilometres in southeastern Australia, the Basin provides drinking water for over three million people, and supports more than 9,000 farms, which produce around 40 percent of Australia's agricultural output. The Basin is also home to hundreds of species of native birds and fish.

The latest fish kill comes after about 10,000 fish died in a similar event a short distance upstream in late December.

Major fish kill events occur when large blooms of algae are killed by heavy rainfall, as happened in December, or a sudden cold snap, as was the case in January. The bacteria that decompose the dead algae use up what remains of the already depleted oxygen in the water, suffocating the fish.

Blooms of cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) occur as a result of low water levels, high temperatures, and high nutrient content in the water due to fertiliser run-off.

While the current drought certainly contributed to the low water levels in Menindee Lakes, lack of rainfall cannot be solely blamed for the fish kills. Many of the fish that have washed up on the banks of the Darling River at Menindee are Murray Cod, some estimated to be at least 30 years old.

Fran Sheldon of the Australian Rivers Institute explained: "Ecological evidence shows the Barwon-Darling River is not meant to dry out to disconnected pools—even during drought conditions. The presence of certain iconic river animals [such as the Murray Cod] within its channels tell us that a dry river bed is not normal for this system."

According to Sheldon, excessive diversion of water for irrigation means that the floodplains and wetlands that feed the lower sections of the river are only filled during times of high flow. Low and medium flows that would otherwise have filled these areas are instead captured upstream for irrigation.

As a result, the river system is no longer able to cope with extended drought.

The public outcry over the recent fish kills has prompted a wave of finger-pointing and grandstanding from the major political parties.

NSW opposition Labor Party leader Michael Daley called for an inquiry into the fish kills, saying that the state's Liberal-National Coalition government "have been repeatedly warned by far-west residents, community groups, scientists and Labor that their water policies would cause devastation on the Darling River."

NSW Regional Water Minister Niall Blair, a member of the rural-based National Party, hit back, claiming that Daley was "ignoring the fact that similar environmental catastrophes happened under their [Labor's] watch when last in government."

Federal Agriculture and Water Resources Minister David Littleproud, another National Party leader, called for Basin states to agree to spend a pitiful $5 million from the Murray-Darling Basin budget to fund a strategy to look after native fish. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority previously cut its native fish strategy after the NSW Coalition government withdrew 60 percent of its funding in 2012.

The poor condition of the Darling River has had wider impacts. The region's fruit growing industry has been decimated, tourism has all but disappeared, and local residents have reported that the poor quality of tap water from the river has been making them sick.

The common failing of decades of attempts to address

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water security in the Basin is that they are all based on a "market solution" to the complex problems posed by various environmental, commercial, social and cultural issues.

The management of the river system is linked to a market in tradeable water entitlements, limited only by the total allocation of water usage. The market in water rights has ensured that huge agribusinesses accumulate vast water entitlements that are used to maximise profits to the detriment of rural communities, small businesses and farms and the environment.

In wet years, these corporate giants grow lucrative and thirsty crops such as cotton, and pump water out of the river into massive on-site storage facilities.

During extended dry periods, it may be more profitable for them to simply sell the water at exorbitant "market-rates" to growers of slow-maturing grapevines and fruit trees, who are seeking to avoid the destruction of their businesses.

If they are unable to pay, small farmers are forced to sell out to the big companies, which either farm the land profitably, due to their massive water assets, or simply add any water entitlements to their portfolios.

Since 1994, when water rights were first separated from land ownership under the federal Keating Labor government, the number of farms in Australia has fallen by approximately 16 percent. This consolidation of farm ownership means the use of water, a precious natural resource in the dry continent, is in the hands of big business.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard introduced the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in 2013. Ostensibly, it was designed to address the over-allocation of water for irrigation and improve the conditions of the river system by reserving more water for environmental flows.

Environmental scientists, including the Wentworth Group, criticised the plan, arguing that the 2,750 gigalitre (gL) per year target for water recovered from irrigation for environmental flows was insufficient to restore the Basin to health.

The Wentworth Group pointed out: "This volume fell substantially short of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's best estimate that between 3,856gL and 6,983gL was required for a healthy river." In other words, the substantial shortfall ensured that the plan was unlikely to ever overcome the river system's environmental problems.

Moreover, the target has not been reached. To date only 2,117.5gL has been recovered, almost three quarters of which was achieved before the Basin Plan was enacted. Progress slowed even further in 2014 when a cap on water "buy-backs" was introduced.

The federal government also seems to have paid well over the market price for several large-scale purchases of water entitlements.

In 2017, after declaring an end to water buy-backs, the government paid $78 million for 22gL of water entitlements from a property at Tandou Station, southwest of Menindee. The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences valued the water rights at less than $25 million.

The deal was brokered by then Deputy Prime Minister, National Party leader and Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce. It resulted in a $36 million profit for Webster Ltd, the major water trader that owns the Tandou property.

Bill Johnson, a former director at the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, told the media: "It is highly questionable whether the Commonwealth got any water for this money."

In reality the "buy-backs" of water entitlements do not necessarily mean more water in the river system. The purchase of a water right is meaningless if there is no water flowing in the relevant area.

The main beneficiary of the water entitlements market has been big business. The government has bought back entitlements, in some cases to water that does not exist, and has subsidised improvements to irrigation infrastructure.

The dead fish at Menindee are just one graphic symptom of the failure of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, like previous "market solutions," to manage Australia's largest river system to meet the needs of the majority of people, rather than the profits of the wealthy few.

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