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cc: (bcc: River Health/NRE)

Subject: Response to Draft Victorian River Health Strategy

RIVERS or DRAINS?

A response to the draft Victorian River Health Strategy

April 2002. Brian Burleigh Main Street, Cowwarr 3857

I confess to have skimmed through and read selected portions of the draft policy.

But sufficient to form an opinion about the objectives and the chances of success.

I m writing these note in the context of the Gippsland streams with which I am most familiar, but the general principles should apply State-wide.

NOT MUCH NATURAL ENVIRONMENT LEFT

The history of European settlement is largely one of attempting to harvest water rivers for irrigation. We ve drained swamps, de-snagged streams and created impoundments. But the rivers remain critically un-tamed in their extreme conditions of drought and flood.

Flood is a particular embarrassment: once that wall of water shoots down the rocky gorge and onto the coastal plain, the only control mechanism is to reduce the velocity by spreading the water across the flood-plain, and preferably into a swamp! Except we drained them a century ago Now we contemplate adding a Greenhouse effect which will increase the frequency of extreme events.

WATER QUALITY dependent on LAND USE

It is not sensible to propose a strategy for river management which doesn t encompass land management. But this strategy largely ignores catchment issues.

BRINGING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT INTO ACCOUNT

We have major primary industry relying on access to irrigation water. Surely we must bring the natural environment into account so that all may perceive the real value of water and rivers. On one hand, we know we must make the best use of each megalitre of water taken from the river; which use will return the maximum benefit without adversely impacting the downstream users of the water, be it town supplies or spawning fish.

FORESTS A COMPETING WATER USER

Much of the hinterland of Gippsland is State Forest. There is a serious quantitative issue to be addressed in catchment management. The more intensively the catchment is harvested and replanted, the lower will be the run-off to rivers. There has to be some way to quantify the potential loss to stream-flow from water diverted to the forest industry, unless we wish to perpetuate concessions to that industry at the expense of potential downstream industry. Not a mention in this management plan.

Who will set the bulk water entitlement for Forests? Are they paying a fair price? Would more wealth be created if that water were allocated to irrigation?

INTEGRATED ADMINISTRATION

The report identifies the stake-holders in the water industry; it is reasonable that River Health be made a public responsibility, but it is folly to disconnect industry from engagement in managing and conserving the resource. The fragmented management structure described in Figure 5.1 guarantees an inefficient and probably incompetent management structure if the objectives are achieved it will be in spite of this sabotage. Multiple, disagreeing bodies is a recipe for inaction. Why not completely re-think the structure of public administration so that a single body can assume responsibility for all the public good aspects of River Management. Better still, include responsibility for the private wealth-creating industry within that same administration.

STREAMFLOW, GROUNDWATER AND SHALLOW AQUIFERS

Streams can disappear underground! In some cases both the aquifer and the stream must be managed as a single unit.

In summary, there are flaws which will undermine your best intentions. Think again.

Brian Burleigh