

The issue of whether or not to build a weir or lock at Wellington continues to divide the community as much as it would our great River Murray and Lower Lakes system, **BRYAN LITTLELY** reports.

**T**HE plight of the River Murray and Lower Lakes has been documented since a weir at Wellington was proposed in November 2006.

Everyone from environmentalists to recreational and professional fishermen, irrigators, politicians and scientists have voiced opinions on what needs to be done to manage the internationally significant environment that is the Lower Lakes and Coorong.

Suggestions range from damming sections of the lakes and Coorong and filling them with sea water, cutting all irrigator entitlements upstream and letting the water flow to the Murray Mouth, and building a weir at Wellington and drying the lakes out.

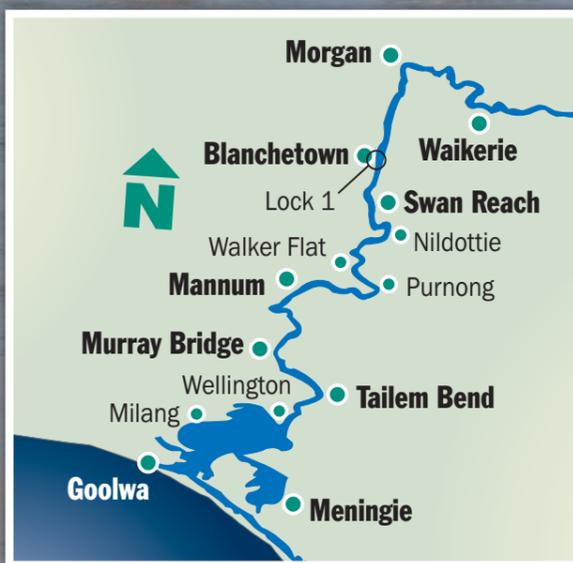
Some of the hottest debate has been the Wellington weir proposal and while the Lower Lakes community of farmers, irrigators and tourism operators argue such a structure would destroy the lakes and their livelihoods, their neighbours up river now say a permanent lock at Wellington may be the only way of saving another significant section of the mighty Murray.

The Managing the Murray Darling Basin from Lock Zero advisory group wants a scientific environmental impact statement to investigate the pros and cons of a permanent construction at Wellington, saying it wants to see a control system in place to "pulse" water into the Lakes and Coorong system, but also to hold water back for the benefit of users upstream from the site to Lock One at Blanchetown.

Experts within the Lower Lakes community say authorities must stop pretending that engineering can solve the problems, recognise there is water in the system to repair the environmental damage and act appropriately.

*The Advertiser* looks at the case for those either side of such a proposed structure.

# The great Murray divide



**SHRINKING:** Peter Smith on the river at Mannum yesterday. His feet are where he believes the level should be. Picture: DEAN MARTIN

## LAKES BELOW WELLINGTON

PROFESSOR of Anthropology and lakeside resident Dr Dianne Bell says the ecological resilience of the River Murray, lakes Alexandrina and Albert, and the Coorong relies on connectivity in the system.

A weir at Wellington – temporary or permanent – would prevent the flushing of salts and nutrients from the river through the lakes and out to sea, Dr Bell says.

"That flushing process should be of interest to people along the river because if it does not occur due to a structure in its way, there will be a build-up of salts and nutrients behind the weir," she says.

A weir or lock at Wellington would also prevent the movement of water by wind between the lake and river, causing a stagnant pool subject to algal blooms.

Shutting off the lakes from the River Murray is sacrificing the lakes – part of an internationally renowned wetland protected by the RAMSAR Convention. Lowering the pool level in the lakes would expose acid sulphate soils and it would then be tempting to open the barrages and flood the lakes with the sea.

"You would create ecological havoc if you destroy this freshwater system," she adds. "You will finish with a saline swamp and kill a number of species on the endangered list.

"Is Australia ready for such an environmental shame?"

Dairy farmer Clem Mason, who farms both in the lower Murray swamps above Wellington and on the lakes, says there is only one option and that is to keep the river open to the lakes and free of structures.

"The Lower Lakes are there for a reason and that is to launder some 500 tonnes of salt a day that flow past Wellington," Mr Mason said.

"A river without a wetland, without a marshland to launder it, will die."

River ecologist Dr Keith Walker said the health of the River Murray depended on maintaining connections between the river and the lakes, and constructing another weir or lock would impede the flow.

"The ... future of SA is pretty bleak if we continue to block river flows," he said.

## UPSTREAM OF WELLINGTON

RIVER users in the 250km stretch of river downstream of Lock One at Blanchetown to the lakes system say they are largely forgotten about when river rescue missions are considered.

Irrigators in the Riverland foodbowl demand a great deal of attention, as does the Coorong and surrounds because of its international significance. Riverbank collapses in the lowest stretch of the Murray get some attention but the advisory group, led by former Murray Darling Association vice president Peter Smith, said raising the river pool level would overcome major issues for irrigators, ferry and tourism operators and boaties.

"Our belief is that if the River Murray Pool Level could be maintained at minimum of 0.4m above AHD this would ensure all irrigators could access their entitlement, ferries could resume normal operation, all boat ramps

could be used, adverse advertising could be turned and the river could resume normal business," Mr Smith says.

He says tourism operators face up to \$126 million in lost business this season as they cannot access slips below Lock One and cannot travel through it because water levels are too low.

"There are a massive amount of problems below Lock One and if the repairs are not done soon and the problems continue to occur, repairs may be impossible."

Mr Smith says desperate families facing economic hardship also are breaking down as a result of the low river levels.

"A recent survey in the Lower Murray showed a loss of tourist trade of as much as 35 per cent with many businesses going to the wall. That has had another flow-on effect on communities."

Woods Point farmer Toni Robinson said a raised river level would enable her to use her water allocation and help stabilise the river banks which are collapsing. "I have not been able to water for three summers because without extremely expensive infrastructure, I cannot get it over the bank," she said.

Mannum Marine boss Ron Greenings said raising the river level to a reasonable height would mean the world to his business. "We were absolutely devastated when the water level dropped to a level that we almost had to shut down our business," he said.

"We had to rebuild our slips and we were out of action for two years. If we can't be assured of a reasonable water level – at the moment it's still 200mm below sea level when it should be 700mm above – we cannot operate."

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