**Australian Government**

**Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts**

Our reference: 2008/16109

Mr Anada Tiéga
Secretary General
Ramsar Convention Secretariat
Rue Mauverney 28
CH-1196 Gland
SWITZERLAND

Dear Mr Tiéga

I am writing to provide a further Article 3.2 notification update for the Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert Ramsar site (Coorong Ramsar site). The original notification was made on 13 December 2006, and an update was provided on 17 October 2008. Additional information about the status of the site and management challenges was also provided at CoP10 in October-November 2008.

The October 2008 update outlined the situation with the exposure of large areas of potential and actual acid sulfate soils, the current impacts and potential future impacts arising from this, and the significant suite of actions underway to monitor and manage this and other risks to the site. I will not repeat these here, but will update you on new developments.

Since our last update, the ecological situation at this site has continued to decline. This is particularly so for Lakes Alexandrina, Lake Albert, the Goolwa Channel, Finniss River and Currency Creek. The site is located at the end of the Murray River. Inflows to the Murray system are at historically low levels, with the three month total for January to March 2009 being the lowest in 117 years of records. Inflow for the 2008-09 water year is currently tracking as the 6th driest on record. The persistence and severity of this drought, particularly over the past three years, is unprecedented.

Since October 2008, water levels in Lake Alexandrina have fallen from approximately minus 0.3m AHD to minus 0.95m AHD. This has significantly increased the amount of lake bed and consequently sulfuric sediments exposed from around 500ha to around 20,000ha. The water level for Lake Albert has been kept relatively steady by pumping of water from Lake Alexandrina. Over the past summer, two tributaries which are part of the Ramsar site completely (Currency Creek) or almost completely (Finniss River) dried out, exposing large areas of acid sulfate soils. Significant effort is underway to manage expected impacts from these being rewetted from autumn and winter rainfall (see below). Other key wetland areas such as Dunn's Lagoon have also disconnected from the main channel and are drying out.

The changes to water levels have also led to increases in the average salinity levels in Lake Alexandrina from 3,000 EC units in October 2008 to current levels of around 6,000 EC units. South Australia has indicated that this is affecting key flora and fauna at the site. The increased salinity levels have been favourable to a polychaete worm which is spreading through the site and attaching to turtles and other substrates (natural and human) at the site.

Australian Governments at Commonwealth and State level have been working together with local communities, scientists, technical experts and engineers to respond to the immediate situation, plan for worst-case future climate scenarios and develop long-term sustainable solutions in a coordinated fashion. The South Australian government has more than 50 projects currently underway in the Coorong and Lower Lakes, including environmental water recovery and delivery, monitoring, planning, scientific investigations, engineering works and feasibility assessments and on-ground rehabilitation and species management.

Updated management actions at the site since the last update include:

- A real-time management strategy was endorsed by the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council in November 2008. The MDBMC comprises members from the Commonwealth, South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Australian Capital Territory governments. The Strategy includes monitoring lake water levels and the consumption of alkalinity which will act as an early warning indicator. The Strategy sets intervention thresholds, which if needed would allow for the minimum quantities of sea water to be introduced to remove the risk of the waterbodies acidifying. This step would not occur until the necessary approvals under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* 1999 (EPBC Act) have been received and the results of any other relevant studies on the impacts of seawater on the Lakes are known. An Environmental Impact Statement is currently being prepared for this proposal for assessment under the EPBC Act.
- The Australian Government has committed up to AUD200 million to address the long-term environmental problems of the Coorong and Lower Lakes. The first stage, a feasibility study of long-term options to manage this important site, is underway and includes community consultation on a first draft of a long-term plan. See http://www.murrayfutures.sa.gov.au/lower.php.
- The Australian Government has committed up to AUD120 million for an integrated network of pipes to service townships, communities and irrigators currently reliant on the Lower Lakes for their water supplies to improve their water security and water quality. The potable component of the Lower Lakes Integrated pipeline which delivers potable water to farms and residents in the Narrung and Poltalloch Peninsulas, adjacent to Lake Albert, was officially opened on 18 February 2009.
- Building on the trials outlined in the previous update, the Australian Government has committed up to AUD10 million for bioremediation and revegetation projects around the Lower Lakes, in a process that will seek to engage and involve the local community. This work will help provide ecosystem stability and resilience, stabilise soils and suppress dust movement, assist management of acidification, improve biodiversity in treated areas and will contribute to the long-term management of the site.
- South Australia will construct 3 regulating structures on the Goolwa Channel, Finniss River and Currency Creek to assist with managed rewetting of ASS and to create a freshwater refuge in this area. This proposal was assessed under the EPBC Act and was approved to proceed, with stringent conditions. Details are available at http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/epbc/epbc_ap.pl?name=referral_detail&proposal_id=4833.
- South Australia is currently examining options to manage Lake Albert, including potentially ceasing pumping of fresh water from Lake Alexandrina.
- A temporary weir at Pomanda Point in Lake Alexandrina is currently being considered by South Australia as a means of protecting South Australia's water supply offtakes at Murray Bridge and Tailem Bend from declining water quality. The impact of this proposal on the Coorong Ramsar site is being assessed under the EPBC Act.

- Revision of the Ramsar management plan for the site was commenced in 2008; it will now be updated following the completion of the long-term plan.
- South Australia is examining potential management interventions for the Coorong, including pumping highly saline water from the lagoon into the ocean.

The Australian and South Australian governments remain very strongly committed to addressing the threats facing the Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert Ramsar site. Australia will continue to provide the Ramsar Convention Secretariat with updates on the site's status while it continues to change.

Yours sincerely

Mr Tony Slatyer
First Assistant Secretary
Water Reform Division
Australian National Focal Point for the Ramsar Convention

19 June 2009

Encl.

cc: Mr Allan Holmes, Chief Executive, South Australian Department for Environment and Conservation