



Australian Government

Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts

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Mr Anada Tiega
Secretary General
Ramsar Secretariat
Rue Mauverney 28
CH-1196
GLAND SWITZERLAND

Dear Mr Tiega

I am writing to inform you, in accordance with Article 3.2 of the Ramsar Convention, of likely changes in the ecological character of the Macquarie Marshes Ramsar Site (Ramsar site number 5AU027, designated under the Convention on 1 August 1986).

Under a project jointly funded by the New South Wales (NSW) and Australian Governments through the NSW Wetland Recovery Program (WRP), a Draft Macquarie Marshes Adaptive Environmental Management Plan (AEMP) has been prepared that aims to guide the restoration of ecological structure and function of the Macquarie Marshes (approx 200,000 ha) including the Macquarie Marshes Ramsar site (18,726 ha). The Draft document identifies ecological, social and cultural assets in the Macquarie Marshes and makes an assessment of the condition of key ecological assets (waterbirds and waterbird habitat, semi-permanent wetland vegetation, and species and communities of special significance) using current evidence.

The Draft Macquarie Marshes AEMP indicates significant reductions in inundation frequency, as well as significant declines in the health, diversity and distribution of key wetland vegetation communities in the Macquarie Marshes. Declines in the health of River Red Gum forest in the northern section of the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve and the disappearance of Water Couch grasslands and Cumbungi rushlands from the southern section of the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve components of the Macquarie Marshes Ramsar Site provide the most telling evidence of a likely change in the ecological character of the site since its designation in 1986. These declines in wetland vegetation have coincided with colonisation by chenopods more indicative of dryland communities.

A detailed description of the ecological character of the northern and southern sections of the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve components of the Macquarie Marshes Ramsar Site is also being developed, and I expect that this document, once completed later this year, will assist the Australian Government to better understand the drivers of ecological change, and inform future management options.

Australian governments recognise the need to improve the ecological health of the Macquarie Marshes Ramsar Site, which incorporates both the northern and southern sections of the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve and the privately owned 'Wilgara' wetlands and have a range of major projects in place to address this issue. I have outlined some of these below. We are confident that collectively these actions will improve the environmental condition of these important wetlands. The ecological character of the site is protected under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and also as part of nature reserves under the *New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*.

The most significant action in place to help respond to the threats currently facing the Macquarie Marshes and other important waterways, is the Australian Government's AUD\$3.1 billion Restoring the Balance in the Murray-Darling Basin Program. This program is an important component of *Water for the Future*, the Australian Government's AUD\$12.9 billion national plan on water. The goal of Restoring the Balance in the Murray-Darling Basin is to acquire water entitlements from willing sellers that represent value for money, and use the water allocated to them for the environment. This will improve the health of the Basin's rivers, wetlands and floodplains.

Other actions include:

- NSW Wetland Recovery Program (WRP)

The NSW Wetland Recovery Program focuses on the Macquarie Marshes and the Gwydir Wetlands. It aims to develop better land and water infrastructure and management practices in consultation with local landholders, key stakeholders and government organisations. By focusing on these two wetlands, the Program will develop a blueprint for recovery procedures for inland wetlands and river systems across Australia.

The NSW and Australian Governments have jointly funded the NSW Wetland Recovery Program. A total of AUD\$26.8 million has been committed. Funding under this program is providing for the development of the Draft Macquarie Marshes AEMP, a strategic audit of structures in the Macquarie Valley that may be interfering with the delivery of environmental flows, wetland grazing management guidelines, a waterbird breeding handbook, and structural works to improve the capacity to deliver environmental flows at appropriate volumes to support ecological outcomes.

A range of scientific research projects in the Macquarie Marshes have also been funded under the WRP that include: research into wetland processes such as trophic dynamics, research into control methods for lippia (an invasive weed), and research into vegetation response to inundation.

- NSW Rivers Environmental Restoration Program

The NSW Government (AUD \$101.5m) and Australian Government (AUD\$71.77m) have set up the Rivers Environmental Restoration Program (RERP) to address the urgent need to improve the health of some of the most significant and threatened wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin, including the Macquarie Marshes.

RERP supports these threatened environments, primarily through the purchase and delivery of greater volumes of water. Specifically, the program purchases water access licences through the existing water markets and directs this water to the targeted wetlands.

- Pillicarwarrina Land Purchase

In August 2008, the Australian and NSW Governments jointly invested \$10.5m to purchase a portion of the property "Pillicarwarrina" located on the southern border of the northern section of the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve. The purchase of Pillicarwarrina has regained over two thousand hectares of wetland that had been converted to production and increased the amount of water entitlement available for environmental flows by over eight billion litres.

The Australian and New South Wales Governments will continue to work together to take action to improve the health of this important Ramsar site including the development of revised management plans for the site that will draw on the ECDs for both the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve and Wilgara components of the site as well as on the Macquarie Marshes Adaptive Environmental Management Plan.

I would appreciate your advising me of any future reporting requirements that will arise as a result of the Australian Government informing you of this matter.

Yours sincerely



Tony Slatyer
National Focal Point
Administrative Authority for
the Ramsar Convention in Australia
First Assistant Secretary
Water Reform Division

17 July 2009