

Let's Blame Cubbie Station

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A statement issued by Viv Forbes
on behalf of the Saltbush Club
<https://saltbushclub.com/category/watch-lists/water-watch/>

12 February 2019

Cubbie Station cops the blame for all of the problems of the Darling River, particularly by green journalists, politicians, and residents of Menindee and Broken Hill. It is blamed for fish kills, lack of water for Broken Hill, irrigators' problems etc – it is a wonder it is not blamed for the drought.

So I decided to look into the matter, reading media and company reports, studying the geography and topography and having discussions with three people who have on-the-ground and inside experience (but no vested interest) in Cubbie. I have had no contacts whatsoever with the current owners or managers of Cubbie, did not visit the operation and have no shares in their operation.

Cubbie Station, the largest irrigation property in the southern hemisphere, is located near Dirranbandi, in south west Queensland, Australia. It is situated on the almost level flood plains of the Culgoa and Balonne rivers.

It was converted from grazing to cotton farming in 1983.



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It was developed by a visionary earth moving contractor, Des Stevenson, and after his death was owned by his family.

The family cotton farm was sent bankrupt by the Millennium Drought (1997-2009) with 5 years without a flow in the rivers.

Cubbie went into voluntary administration in October 2009. Ironically the catchment received flooding rains in March 2010 and again in January 2011.

Cubbie was sold by the administrators to a Chinese textile consortium led by Shandong Ruyi in 2012 with a private Melbourne firm Lempriere holding 20%. ALP Treasurer Wayne Swan approved the deal. There were conditions that the Chinese consortium sell down its stake from 80 per cent to 51 per cent. A recent rearrangement has left Dubbo businessman Roger Fletcher holding the 20 per cent stake and the Chinese consortium applying for more time to complete the sell down.

On average the Darling contributes 16% of the Murray flow. The Condamine Balonne contributes 15% of this, ie 2.4% of the total Murray flow. 45% of this is extracted by all irrigators ie 1.1% of the Murray flow. And finally Cubbie accounts for 15% of extractions in the Condamine-Balonne representing 0.2% of the Murray flows.

Cubbie has 4.2% of the storage capacity on the Darling River and its tributaries.

Cubbie does have a licence for some extraction under the Dirranbandi Irrigation Scheme on the same conditions as other irrigators. This is controlled by the Queensland Government.

But the bulk of Cubbie's water licences are high-flow licences ie Cubbie can only begin storage when the river is in flood and above a certain height. At that height the water would not go into the river system - it would spread over the flood plain which may be at a lower level than the river banks. It would never return to the river - it would water the flood plain, soak into the ground or be lost to evaporation. It would never get to the Murray River.

<https://cubbie.com.au/january-2019-water-update/>

Because of the drought, no cotton or summer crops will be harvested on Cubbie Station in 2019.

If Cubbie were closed down tomorrow it would not be noticed in the Darling River during a drought. To make a real difference to the Darling River we need to "be like the beaver" and build a series of weirs to pond and hold back flood water. This would be of great benefit to landowners, fish and the river environment.

Here is a link to a report by a reputable and sensible engineer and observer, Malcolm Roberts, who recently investigated Cubbie Station:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94O-RG440ms>

Cubbie is a convenient target for the green anti-everything brigade.

Howard Jones, a Sunraysia environmentalist, retired Coomealla irrigator, and a member of the Basin Community Committee, says those blaming cotton and Cubbie for the Darling's woes are "firing at the wrong targets".

Alan Whyte, a citrus grower on the lower Darling, north of Wentworth, says that "the Darling River problems are systemic; they're not crop-based". Fish and residents of the Darling are in trouble because of the drought, which is a normal event, but mainly because not enough flood water was conserved and too much of it was wasted in "environmental flows".

Viv Forbes
12 Feb 2019

A Personal Note:

I was raised on a dairy farm at Wheatvale west of Warwick in Queensland. The Condamine River ran through our farm. I did not know it at the time but we lived in the headwaters of the giant Murray Darling Basin.

I saw floods and droughts come and go. I loved the floods - our house was well above flood levels and when the Condamine flooded I was usually allowed to stay home from school.

I watched in fascination as the creeping flood waters covered our lucerne flats, leaving a layer of fertile silt over the paddocks and refilling the shallow underground water aquifers that supplied our windmill, stock water and vegie garden. Then after the water receded the lucerne, crops and vegies grew. While the sun shone we made hay using green energy power – a two horse-power mower and a one horse-power rake. We let solar energy dry the hay and then with pitch forks and an old two horse-power wagon, we carted and stacked the hay in the hay shed. Dad made me a special short-handled pitch fork so that I could help.

There was no drought assistance or insurance then - Dad's drought strategy was simple: "don't overstock and keep the hayshed full".

But there was river "management" even then.

Warwick had a weir on the Condamine, and a water supply dam (Leslie Dam) was built on a tributary of the Condamine. But we had water fools then too, the worst being a busy-body group called "The Condamine River Trust". Their main aim seemed to be to "clean up the river so floods will get away quicker". They forced their way onto every farm and ripped out everything that slowed down flood water, including dozens of beautiful weeping willows and old gum trees. Even at my young age I was offended by this desecration. I now know it was triply foolish – it increased river erosion, reduced silt fertilisation of river flats and brought closer the next water drought. The River Trust were like mad beavers destroying their own dams and weirs.

We must conserve water from the floods so we will have water in the droughts.