

## **Logging and sedimentation issues in the Bunyip/Westernport Arena** (Report by Bob Thompson, June 2006)

**On Thursday 18 May 2006, I attended a seminar organised by the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority (PPWCMA) at Hastings Marina, titled ‘The State of Western Port Catchment’, at which Mr Chris Chesterfield, General Manager Waterways, Melbourne Water, spoke on the state of rivers and water quality.**

I used this opportunity to raise questions about Minister Thwaites’ failure to organise a rigorous scientific study of possible connections between logging in the Bunyip catchment, sedimentation in the Bunyip River, and turbidity in the eastern arm of Western Port (which threatens seagrass communities in this RAMSAR<sup>1</sup>-declared area).

I met with Chris after the conclusion of the seminar, and he invited me to email him about ideas I have been circulating about possible connections between logging in the Bunyip catchment and turbidity in Western Port, and diversion of Bunyip water to the Tarago catchment. My email to Chris on 21 May is reproduced below.

“Dear Chris,

Thanks for the opportunity to meet at Hastings on Thursday. I thought it might be worthwhile to send you some extracts that acquaint you with previous communications I have had with various players, and where they seem to sit at present on the various issues.

Re PPWCMA, I wrote to Mick Lumb<sup>2</sup> in March 05, and addressed the issue of a possible logging/turbidity connection. I also raised the possibility of redirecting Bunyip water to the Tarago, as follows:

"On a slightly divergent note, may I draw your attention to a suggestion that I made in my response letter to the Draft RCS<sup>3</sup> document (also enclosed). My logic proceeds thus -

1. From the June Water White Paper, it would appear that, while there is an intention to bring back on stream the Tarago Reservoir for town-water supply, there is no mention of re-utilising supply from the 3900 ha Bunyip Special Water Supply Catchment.
2. If logging were to cease in the Bunyip, and given that this catchment is not subject to the same agricultural pressures that affect water quality in the Tarago, clean town-water supply from the Bunyip should remain an attractive prospect.
3. The Bunyip catchment is ideally suited as a special reserve for non-motorised passive recreation and eco-tourism experiences (with its attendant Rainforest Sites of Significance in proximity to Melbourne), and this limited land-use would be compatible with clean town-water supply.
4. The Bunyip Weir already exists, and it is situated barely 5 km from the source of the Tarago River, accessible via the valley of Tin Creek.
5. It would be a relatively low-capital-cost project to pump clean Bunyip water across to the Tarago via a steel pipeline up the Tin Ck valley. Power could come from a relatively short 22KV feeder line from the lower Bunyip valley. (Perhaps Federal money could be attracted for such a project.)

From the perspective of the UBAG, this proposal makes sense. While definite figures are not yet at hand, research being conducted by The Central Highlands Alliance looks like establishing that, on

current values, water supply from Central Highlands forested areas carries a value approximately fifteen times that of the value of extracted wood products from the same areas. When this purely economic rationale is coupled with the environmental and social benefits that would result from the alternative recreational land-use that I am suggesting for the Bunyip Catchment, I believe the PPWCMA would be arguing from the position of a very attractive triple bottom line if it were to support and propose this alternative land use as an alternative to the current wholesale logging that is happening in the upper Bunyip right now."

The CMA's response came via a letter, in June, from Ian Morgans<sup>4</sup>, in which he explained about the CCI<sup>5</sup>, WQIP<sup>6</sup> and WSDS<sup>7</sup>. On the question of a possible connection between logging and Western Port turbidity, Ian wrote that "The CCI design .. will define a relative risk for timber harvesting and set actions to reduce that risk as part of a package for all the high risks to the Western Port water quality target. (...) Whether the WQIP could provide information contributing to the future cessation of logging in the Upper Bunyip catchment is impossible to predict at this stage. (...) We will endeavour to have the WQIP and the WSDS give attention to the possible conflict between water quality and timber harvesting in the Bunyip Special Water Supply Catchment."

A bit of a mixed bag, but enough to give some encouragement that my views are being recognised.

On the water redirection idea, he wrote "Changing the use of the Upper Bunyip catchment to a more dedicated focus on water supply may be a worthwhile proposal for investigation and consistent with Actions WA1 and WA7 for water supply and river health."

Perhaps he had in mind the now-recognised fact that harvesting causes reductions of water run-off from catchments, and that this could conflict with both supply potential and environmental flow requirements - not sure - but I find it very interesting that the subsequent Central Region report<sup>8</sup> contained a reference to possible reconnection of the Bunyip, whereas the earlier OWOFF white paper<sup>9</sup> did not.

And I'm also intrigued to see that the Draft WSDS for Melbourne 2006 - 2055 contains:

"Action 4: Melbourne Water will continue to prepare for the reconnection of Tarago Reservoir by 2011, including the completion of an environmental flow assessment for the Tarago and Bunyip Rivers by December 2006."

Clearly something's going on here, and I'd like to know whether the Bunyip reference is to the sections upstream of confluence with the Tarago, or only to those downstream of this point. In other words, is the concern driven by possible impacts on lowland river health in the Bunyip when Tarago water is diverted, or does it apply also to effects caused by possible Bunyip diversion?

In any case, I believe my basic point stands, as supported by Peter Wallbrink<sup>10</sup>, that it is likely that it is the Bunyip headwaters (not the Tarago) that is contributing the offending sediment load to Western Port, and causing the 15% of turbidity in its eastern arm. If we want to halt this pollution, or if we don't want to drop this load into the Tarago if/when the Bunyip is diverted (under my proposal), then on both counts it would be a good idea to phase out the logging in the Bunyip.

I would be very pleased to have your perspective on these points, Chris, and whether you think Melbourne Water might buy these arguments and put in place its own initiatives to get a scientifically rigorous study of the Bunyip River underway. I have long advocated the need for regular monitoring of turbidity in the Bunyip upstream of the Bunyip Weir. At the very least, two

testing sites should be established just above the weir, one in the Bunyip itself, and the other in Tin Creek, its major eastern-catchment tributary. Monthly sampling should be performed at these sites to supply data to a longitudinal study over at least two years.

In addition to turbidity levels, I believe it would be worthwhile to conduct atomic absorption/resonance and radionuclide tests on clay samples in the upper Bunyip and in Western Port, to try to nail down the extent of any connection between

a) clays being disturbed by logging operations and clays detected at the weir, and b) these same clays contributing to turbidity in Western Port.

The stakes are high when the health of Western Port, a RAMSAR site, is involved. I think the considerable cost of such tests can be justified when we take into account the undeniable effects of turbidity on threatened eco communities such as the seagrass colonies there.

If a link is proven, then I believe this would give added impetus to the need to amend the EPBC Act<sup>11</sup>, such that logging in an RFA<sup>12</sup> area (which currently enjoys an "exclusion" under the Act) would no longer be exempt if it can be proven that this action is having consequential impacts-at-a-distance in other places such as a RAMSAR site. I have already asked Greg Hunt (member for Flinders) to take this up with Senator Campbell and am awaiting his reply.

Yours sincerely,

Bob Thompson

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<sup>1</sup> The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971)

<sup>2</sup> Dr Mick Lumb, Chair, PPWCMA

<sup>3</sup> abbr: Regional Catchment Strategy

<sup>4</sup> PPWCMA RCS Implementation Manager

<sup>5</sup> abbr: Coastal Catchment Initiative

<sup>6</sup> abbr: Water Quality Improvement Plan

<sup>7</sup> abbr: Water Supply/Demand Strategy

<sup>8</sup> Victorian Government Discussion Paper - *Sustainable Water Strategy Central Region* (October 2005)

<sup>9</sup> Victorian Government White Paper - *Our Water - Our Future* (June 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Dr Peter Wallbrink (CSIRO Canberra) - Principal author of the *Western Port Sediment Study* (2003)

<sup>11</sup> Federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*

<sup>12</sup> abbr: Regional Forest Agreement