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Editorial...

David Dowling, Editor

WHAT a pounding the cotton industry has faced in 2019 so far regarding water use. The criticism of greedy (corporate?) farmers stealing all the water and killing the fish in the lower Darling has come as quite a shock to all those growers looking at bare fields, empty storages and little or no crop.

Twenty five years ago, the industry faced a similar barrage of criticism about excessive chemical use, poor application practices and yes, some dead fish. In that case, much of the criticism was justified. The industry response was to clean up its act and to concentrate on best practice spray application and chemical use. The result was an industry which could hold its head high as a world leader, not just in best practice farming and responsible use of GM technology, but in environmental management.

The difference between then and now is that the criticism of cotton industry water use has almost no basis in fact. The biggest critics at the moment generally fall into two camps. Some are just pig-ignorant about farming and the way the river systems work in Australia – especially in relation to the northern Murray-Darling Basin – the others are brazen political opportunists.

The northern MDB is an area which is defined by drought and highly irregular river flows. It is an environment which is totally removed and outside the experience of people who live in the coastal fringe and even in the southern part of the basin which has much more reliable rainfall and river flow. The natural state of the northern basin rivers is either flood or mostly dry river beds with short periods of ‘regular’ flows in between. If we had removed all the storages from the northern rivers and banned all extraction, the Darling at Wilcannia would still be bone dry and the fish would still be dead. The pitiful amount of water extracted by the cotton industry over the past two years was from rainfall stored in previous years and without the storages, it would have evaporated or gone to the Southern Ocean by now.

The dams on these rivers are also used to store environmental water which is supposed to help preserve the downstream environment as it would be in its natural state. Unfortunately, there is almost no accountability – scientific or otherwise – of the management of this water which often seems to be used to create an unnatural utopian vision of our rivers and even to provide recreational facilities in South Australia.

It’s possible to present sound arguments to address the ignorance. Unfortunately, there is another group of critics willing to use any false information to push their own political barrow. They are willing to sacrifice the well-being of the thousands of hard working people who depend on irrigation for their livelihoods. These people – from farmers to shopkeepers and salespeople – have done more to contribute to the well-being of this country than all the Greens politicians and like-minded political hacks will ever do.

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