



# Traveston Dam tests our environmental process

Continuing debate about government plans to dam the Mary River near Gympie to secure urban drinking water for south-east Queensland has more twists and turns than the tranquil waterway itself. Sue Neales reports.

Stand in the broad alluvial valley of the wending Mary River and it is hard to imagine its farm paddocks, gum trees and scattered homes submerged under five metres of water.

Until it announced a postponement to the project after *Ecós* went to press, the Queensland Government was ploughing ahead with plans to build the controversial \$1.7 billion Traveston Crossing Dam across the Mary River near the small country town of Kandanga.

Despite widespread doubts about its economic, environmental and community impact, the government claims the massive 660 000 megalitre two-stage dam is essential to solve the drinking water crisis facing Brisbane and Queensland's rapidly growing south-east region.

In late November, Queensland's independent major projects and environmental regulator, Coordinator-General Colin Jensen, advised the state government that the dam, 27 kilometres south of Gympie, should be postponed given the site needed significant environmental mitigation work for federal approval.

The project's final environmental impact

**One of the wild stretches of river at risk of inundation by the proposed Traveston Dam.**

Arkin Mackay, [www.stoppress.com.au](http://www.stoppress.com.au)

assessment report will now land on the desk of Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett, for checking against Commonwealth responsibilities under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*.

He will have to determine, in particular, how much damage the dam would cause to the survival of two endangered and one vulnerable native species living in the Mary River: the Mary River turtle (*Elusor macrurus*), the Mary River cod (*Maccullochella peelii mariensis*), and the iconic Queensland lungfish (*Neoceratodus forsteri*), of the dinosaur era, now only found in the Mary and Burnett rivers of south-east Queensland.

A landmark legal case involving the lungfish, classed as vulnerable to extinction, and another contentious southern Queensland dam on the Burnett River is currently before the Federal Court. It is expected to hold critical implications for any go-ahead given to the Traveston Crossing Dam (TCD).

The Wide Bay Burnett Conservation Council alleges the 2005 Paradise Dam on the Burnett near Bundaberg

\* This online version has been altered from the original.





**A landmark legal case involving the lungfish, classed as vulnerable to extinction, and another contentious southern Queensland dam on the Burnett River is currently before the Federal Court. It is expected to hold critical implications for any go-ahead given to the Traveston Crossing Dam (TCD).**



**Anti-dam campaigners picket the ALP State Conference on the Gold Coast in June.**  
Arkin Mackay, [www.stoppress.com.au](http://www.stoppress.com.au)

has breached its environmental approval conditions, as approved by the federal government.

Scientists and conservationists claim fish 'lifts' or mechanical ladders built into the dam wall to move fish up and down river are not suitable for the heavy-bodied lungfish (which grow up to 1.5 metres long and weigh 40 kg), are preventing their movement and spawning, and instead are causing injury and death.

'In essence, if some poor lungfish actually manages to get (into the upstream lift) and gets towed up the (dam wall) side and over the top, the problem is there is then a 25 metre drop,' Conservation Council's Roger Currie told a Senate inquiry into the Traveston Crossing Dam proposal last year.

'They would be dead when they hit the water or severely brain damaged.'

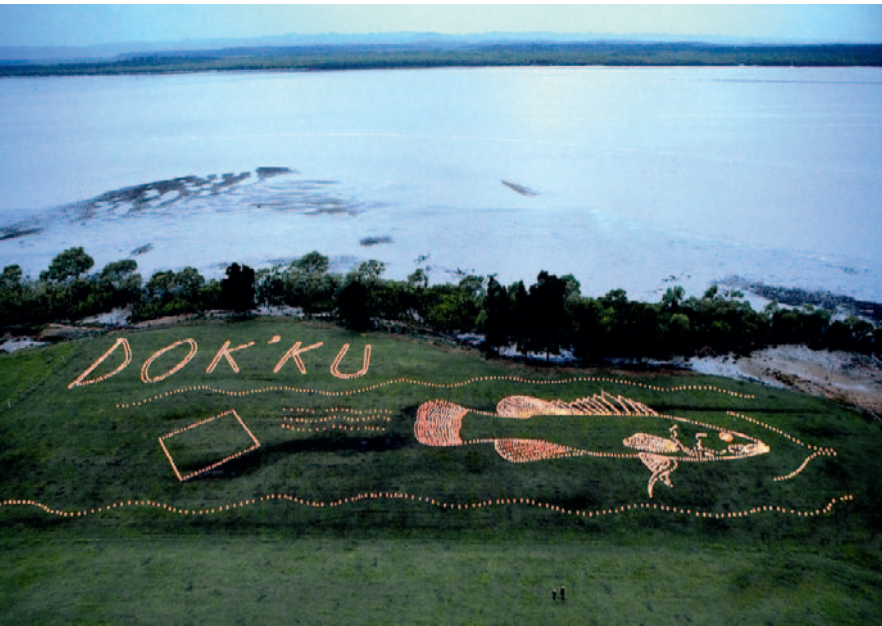
An audit by the federal government of the performance of the fish lifts on the Paradise Dam wall concluded they were only 'partially compliant', bolstering the hopes of conservationists for a legal win.

Professor Jean Joss, head of biology and the Australian Lungfish Research Facility at Sydney's Macquarie University, has spearheaded a campaign to petition Minister Garrett about the threat the Traveston Dam poses to the lungfish.

She points out that while lungfish can survive in dams, they can only breed in slow-flowing river shallows full of weed where they spawn and raise their young.

\* This online version has been altered from the original.





'It is exactly these features that are lost entirely by permanent flooding when dams are constructed,' Professor Joss said, after her lungfish petition had collected more than 7000 signatures.

'When it is full, (the TCD) will have permanently destroyed a significant area of lungfish spawning and nursery grounds.'

But the outcome of the lungfish court case might be too late to halt progress on the Mary River dam.

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh said she expects a final federal government decision on the ambitious water project in March or April 2009.

A spokesperson for Deputy Premier and Infrastructure Minister Paul Lucas said federal government approval would have been the signal for 'full steam ahead' for construction of the Traveston Crossing Dam.

The government wants to build the new 36-kilometre-long dam as part of the 'missing link' in its \$9 billion water grid aimed at securing a safe and reliable water supply for south-east Queensland for the next three decades.

Brisbane's population alone is tipped to mushroom from three to five million by 2050. Water consumption in the region, even with tough restrictions, is expected to double from the current 480 000 ML annually to more than 800 000 ML in the next 40 years.

The state government says a dam on the Mary River, which flows from the Conondale and Blackall Ranges into Great Sand straight near Fraser Island, is needed to supply up to 70 000 extra megalitres of water a year or 27 per cent of the additional water supply required by 2015.

Stage 1 of the dam, which will flood 3300 hectares of farmland and displace about 340 families from their farms and homes, is claimed to be cheaper and less environmentally disruptive than a large desalination plant.

'The Traveston Crossing Dam is the best and cheapest option when compared to all possible and known desalination sites in south-east Queensland, even including the costs of greenhouse emissions, carbon and pumping,' Minister Lucas said recently.

'The cost of creating a desalination plant to produce the same amount of water delivered to Brisbane would

**The Dok'Ku Giant Cod Project protest conducted at the mouth of the Murray River and co-ordinated by Argentinian artist Jorge Pujol, raised attention to the plight of native cod in the Mary River system using thousands of candles.**

Stewart Riddell, Stewart Photography/  
Jorge Pujol (the artist)

**The expensive but apparently unsuccessful fish ladder constructed over the Burnett River Dam wall.**

Arkin Mackay, www.stoppress.com.au

be up to \$807 million more expensive than building the Traveston dam.'

The government also claims the TCD will:

- generate 1750 jobs during construction and 780 long-term jobs
- contribute \$3.44 billion to the national economy through enhanced water security
- make more productive use of unallocated water flowing down the Mary River
- only reduce productive farming land in the Mary River valley by 1.7 per cent.
- be ready to provide water by 2012.

Opponents to the TCD proposal remain numerous and vociferous.

They have mounted a massive campaign, claiming the dam is unnecessary, politically motivated, of a poor design (being large and shallow), and too expensive in terms of water costs and greenhouse gas emissions.

But many locals also fear work on the dam has already begun in earnest without waiting for federal government sign-off on the ambitious project.

In late 2007, signs of bulldozing around the site of the proposed kilometre-long wall at sleepy Traveston Crossing were dismissed by the state government as tree planting to help offset the dam's greenhouse gas emissions.

In November 2008, the federal government ordered a formal investigation into geotechnical work at the site of the proposed dam after Greens Leader Bob Brown told parliament 20 000 cubic metres of dirt had been dug from the site without federal approval.

Ms Bligh denied any blasting has occurred at the site of the proposed dam. She said any work on the dam site was geotechnical in nature, involving diamond core and percussion drilling, electrical resistivity and acoustic testing.



'It's all part of an ongoing program of investigations that began in 2006,' Ms Bligh said, accusing Senator Brown of making 'wildly inaccurate' and misleading claims.

The President of the anti-dam Save the Mary River group, Kevin Ingersole, claims that local farmers have been pressured and harassed into selling their homes to the government, a major road system at the dam site has already been built and early construction work is proceeding unimpeded.

'Our community will not allow the government to start building the dam at Traveston Crossing without the approval process having been completed,' Ingersole says.

'If they throw away the rule book and try something like that on, they'll get an appropriate response.'

But Ingersole admits much of the damage to his local community has already been done.

More than three-quarters of local landholders whose farms are within the affected flooded 'footprint' of the TCD have already sold up and moved on, funded by \$443 million of taxpayers' funds from the 2008–09 state budget.

Neighbours and families have been pitted against each other over the dam issue, with confidentiality clauses in sale agreements forbidding landholders to discuss the sale arrangement each has been offered by the government.

'There is an unbelievable, deep seething anger here,' Ingersole explains.

'Not about the dam itself, but the way (the government) has undertaken the process, treating people like children, leaving them feeling disempowered and dislocated.

'This is a shattered community; we've got family breakdowns and neighbours for generations no longer speaking to each other – this threat has been hanging over us since 2006 and it's taking its toll on people.'

Some farmers are refusing steadfastly to budge from their family farms until the dam is officially approved.

But many others have succumbed to the pressure of almost already daily phone calls from Queensland Water Infrastructure officials encouraging them to sell now or risk a much lower price under compulsory acquisition.

Local Kandanga farmer and anti-dam campaigner Glenda Pickersgill is determined not to give in, although her river-frontage cattle farm and home, within sight of the 1.6-kilometre-long wall dam, is threatened with complete inundation by the project.

'I stand to lose everything, but I am still not convinced this dam will ever go ahead,' Pickersgill says. 'There are too many things against it, and signs that even Anna Bligh may be getting worried about how this proposal may affect her election chances.'

Politics is the one thing that may save the Mary River valley. Already several local Labor members have lost their seats over the TCD plan, another has defected to the Greens and other Labor seats are threatened if an early state election is held next year.

In an unusual, but politically opportunistic, move for a conservative party, the Liberal National Party Opposition has promised to scrap the dam proposal if elected to power.

Shaken by the Murray–Darling River Basin plight, the Rudd government also now appears to favour



**The lungfish, *Neoceratodus forsteri*, breeds in slow-running rapids areas that will be inundated by the new dam.**

istockphoto/Amanda Rohde

desalination plants and alternative new sources of water rather than new dams as part of its latest 'Water for the Future' plans.

Water Minister Penny Wong recently warned that state governments could no longer treat rivers and groundwater systems like 'magic puddings', as if there were limitless supplies of water and rain.

The Director of the Institute of Sustainable Futures at Sydney's University of Technology, Stuart White, agrees.

In his response to early government environmental impact studies on the TCD, he found that a range of alternative water measures, including desalination plants, were better options than the proposed Mary River dam in terms of future greenhouse gas emissions.

Professor White pointed out that the Environmental Impact Statement had suffered from 'glaring omissions' when calculating the dam's long-term environmental impact, and concluded it was 'neither necessary, nor desirable.'

Kevin Ingersole has no doubts the decision to approve – or not – the Traveston Dam next year will be a real litmus test of the Rudd government's commitment to its water, climate change and sustainability policies.

'Its water policy backs the notion that healthy rivers and sustainable, reliable water supplies are not mutually exclusive,' Ingersole says.

'It's hard to see that the federal government could espouse such noble aspirations and then cave in to the Queensland Government's misguided determination to build this dam.'

#### **More information:**

Save the Mary River Campaign, <http://www.savethe-maryriver.com>

QLD Government information, <http://www.dip.qld.gov.au/projects/water/traveston-crossing-dam.html>

Previous *Ecos* article, [http://www.ecosmagazine.com/?act=view\\_file&file\\_id=EC133p14.pdf](http://www.ecosmagazine.com/?act=view_file&file_id=EC133p14.pdf)

\* This online version has been altered from the original.