



LOUISE BURGE

The drought refuses to break along the Murray River and the parched landscape yields up a crop of ruin and tragedies which are testing even the most stoic of farmers.

Cry me a RIVER

BY CLAIRE SCOBIE PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL AMENDOLIA



EXPOSED At 21.8% capacity, the Hume Dam is no longer a reliable back-up for irrigators further down the Murray

IN KENYA, the herdsmen of the Mandera region have been dubbed the “climate canaries” – the people most likely to be wiped out first by global warming. In Australia, it is the farmers who are on the front-line. Few will admit it. Conservative and deeply sceptical, many dismiss climate change as hogwash. But the stress of trying to squeeze every drop out of the country’s greatest river system – the Murray – is taking its toll, tearing at the fabric of rural life, leaving bankruptcies and suicides in its wake, and triggering unprecedented water scarcity.

Malcolm Holm knows just how bad things can get. A dairy farmer with a bullish smile, Holm, 39, depends, as do more than 50,000 other farmers, on the river. *The Bulletin* first meets Malcolm and his wife, Jenny Wheeler, 47, in Sydney’s Darling Harbour in mid-July. As we talk, it’s hard not to notice his strapped left arm, with angry red weals seared along the forearm, resting inert on the table.

Last October, the NSW government faced an unparalleled situation. Following the lowest inflows into the Murray on record, they miscalculated



MALCOLM HOLM AND FAMILY

how much water was available. “Carryover water” worth millions, saved and paid for by farmers, was slashed by 20% without consultation. Three weeks later, came another 32% cut. Today they are on zero allocation.

Aside from running his own 400 hectares and 500 dairy cows in Finley, on the plains of south-west NSW, Holm is a respected pillar in his local community and, as director of the state’s Irrigators Council, attended last November’s second crisis meeting of irrigators in Sydney. Afterwards his mobile didn’t stop ringing with calls from anxious farmers. He returned home knowing his own “drought strategy had been blown out” at the cost of \$1.5m from the loss of water, fodder and milk production. The next day, he was back at work in the dairy.

The grain auger – a cylindrical barrel that moves the grain from one massive silo to the other – was jammed. After fiddling with the machine he flicked a switch. “I wasn’t concentrating.” He pauses, frowning. “I was thinking about water.” It was the wrong switch. In the blink of an eye, Malcolm Holm had sliced off his hand.

FIVE YEARS AGO, the last major drought was attributed to El Niño’s dry cyclical conditions. Fast-forward to 2007 and few scientists doubt that the “big dry” is caused, in part, by climate change. Some refer to it as a climate shift; others, like Australian of the Year Tim Flannery are unequivocal that it is a foretaste of what’s to come. “Australia is a harbinger of other places in the world,” Flannery says. “There will be water crises all over the world.”

Last November, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report stated that “the annual flow in the Murray-Darling basin is likely to fall by 10-25% by 2050”, resulting in a decline in production from agriculture and forestry. Two months later Prime Minister John Howard announced a \$10bn rescue plan for the Murray-Darling basin. While Queensland, NSW and South Australia were quick to cede power to the federal government, Victoria is still resisting the proposed overhaul.

The day after meeting Malcolm Holm, I set off from Albury, on the

border between NSW and Victoria, to see the impact of the drought along the Murray. Ironically, it’s raining. To an untrained eye, the green verges look promising. To Neville and Ruth Kydd, the grass in their paddocks is too sparse for their herd of dairy cows, which they have been hand-feeding since Christmas. This salt-of-the-earth couple, in grubby jeans and gumboots, were particularly hard hit by last year’s water cuts. They had bought \$500,000 worth of water, but the government took back almost half, Neville tells me, grim-faced. “How could they get it so wrong? It’s mind-boggling.”

Australia’s rural water system is, indeed, mind-boggling. There are 24 different sorts of water licences in the Murray-Darling basin alone. As Neville Kydd says: “If this season there is no water in the dam, virtually no dairy farmers will survive. It will return to sheep country.”

From their spartan bungalow it is 25km down the road to Prairie Home, the generous homestead of Louise and Andrew Burge. Tea and cake are laid out in the kitchen, alongside a wad of notes typed by 49-year-old Louise, detailing the state of their sheep and crop farm. She refutes evidence that the current drought is driven by climate change, providing a series of old photographs showing the Murray in drier conditions than it is now.

“We are seeing a herd instinct on carbon trading and people are being educated to simply plant trees,” Louise says. “Australia has developed mass plantations in the upper catchments so in the next drought we will have less run-off because the trees are going to take water. This will exacerbate the drought.”

While planting vast forests attempts to fix one problem, Australia’s carbon emissions, it creates another. As the drought bites, the traditional conflict between farmers and environmentalists is brought to the fore. And while all the farmers I spoke to were global warming sceptics, they were passionate conservationists.

The pressure on the Burges was evident. “You wake up in the middle of the night and then feel like the dog’s breakfast the next day,” says Andrew Burge, deep grooves etched across his forehead. In these situations, mistakes



WAYNE COCKAYNE

happen. “Malcolm Holm is a particularly careful man. A lot of people were significantly upset after his accident ...” Louise trails off. “It was horrible. Afterwards dairy farmers rallied around to run his farm.”

DESPITE THEIR CLOSE-KNIT communities, towns along the Murray are feeling the strain. Figures from the Reserve Bank reveal that rural debt has almost doubled from \$26.4bn in 1999 to \$43.3bn in 2005. In Deniliquin, 20 minutes from the Burges’ farm, the wide streets are eerily quiet. That evening, in the empty Federal Hotel, I meet Wayne Cockayne, an obliging 44-year-old whose glassy eyes stare into the mid-distance. “This town’s gone backward,” he says. “In 1979, when I left school, the town was prospering.”

For the past four years, Cockayne hasn’t made a cent from the cereals on his 1200-hectare property. This year he had to pay for trucked-in water to flush his toilet. He grits his teeth. “I know about depression,” he goes on. “I locked myself in at home for four days. Then I got in the car and drove into town. A friend found me slumped over the steering wheel crying. I never thought I’d be a person who would suffer from it, but I’ve been better since I went to a grief and depression counsellor.”

Deniliquin is home to SunRice, the largest rice mill in the southern hemisphere and a major employer in the region. In the past 18 months, I was told, dozens of workers have been retrenched. Many are leaving for the mining boom. “Farmers are feeling destitute. Rice paddocks have not been farmed for several years,” Dr Harry von Rensburg tells me in his surgery in Barham, 100km west of Deniliquin. An owlish, direct-talking South African GP, von Rensburg has lived in Barham for the past decade.

“In the first seven years, I had, on average, two people a year from the farming community who presented with depression.” This year he is “actively managing” more than 120 farmers, including some of the most high-profile landowners in the district. A psychologist comes once a week and has back-to-back appointments. “If we could get her twice a week, we would fill that.”

The stigma of depression, continues the doctor, is akin “to talking about someone who’s having an affair”. The knock-on affect is substance abuse: alcohol among older farmers, and cocaine for younger farmers who can afford it. And cannabis? “Heaps. People perceive it as ‘not that bad.’”

A year ago, the mental health body, beyondblue, reported that one farmer commits suicide every four days. Is that figure accurate? “Absolutely. In the past three years there have been eight suicide attempts here. A handful are on suicide watch – their spouses or children have taken control of firearms.” He leans back in his big black chair. “Shooting is the most favoured method; second is hanging.”

Von Rensburg puts this dramatic increase down to the drought’s longevity and the uncertainty it brings. “People are asking themselves, will this be ongoing? That is the greatest fear – what we can’t control.”

Neil Eagle, the grand old man of orchard farming in the region, is a sprightly 73-year-old who refuses to be beaten. Unlike his neighbour, who didn’t purchase water this year and whose orange trees are bare, Eagle’s citrus forest looks healthy. “It could get to the stage where there’s no water to buy,” he says. “Then it would take seven to 10 years to get back into production. That would be very serious.”

Eagle knows many farmers with “less than half equity in their farms, and some close to going under”. His family has been living around Eagle Creek since 1870. “In the 1940s and 50s it was definitely hotter than it is now,” he says. “I don’t agree with the doom and gloom merchants that the sea is going to rise.” He gives a wry smile. “It’s become nearly a religion, this idea of global warming.” Still, he can’t resist a swipe at those downstream. “The equivalent of two-and-a-quarter Dartmouth Dams go up in evaporation in the Lower Lakes. It’s a squander of our resources.”

Some 500km west, in South Australia, Anne Jensen, an environmental scientist, is witnessing a collapse of entire ecosystems on the floodplains. Kingston-on-Murray was once called a “garden of Eden” for river red gums. Today “hundreds of thousands of trees” are dying. Black box eucalypts and river gums require natural flooding to survive. They have done without a



NEVILLE KYDD

decent drink for over a decade, but now there's "an abrupt change", according to Jensen. "Everyone is fighting to keep what they've got in a situation where people are going to need to give something up," she says. "We have to make sure that the river is healthy enough to support us all."

Two years ago, the "Living Murray" program pledged to recover 500 gigalitres, the equivalent of Sydney Harbour, for the Murray for environmental purposes by 2009. At present they are likely to fall 80% short of that target. For years, the country's most valued artery has been withering, now there is barely a base flow to run right through the river. The current irrigation system, built up over the last half century during a high-rainfall period is no longer sustainable in today's drier times.

"In 2002 the Murray ran out of water," says Professor Mike Young, a water expert at Adelaide University. "Now Adelaide is in a very frightening situation. If it doesn't rain and the dams don't fill, there isn't enough water in the system to supply the city."

There are three dredges in the river's mouth at the Coorong, an internationally acclaimed wetland, now gasping to stay alive as sand pours in. The pelican population is in decline due to a lack of fish and hyper-salinity: the water in the southern lagoon is four times saltier than the ocean. As Anne Jensen explains, "In South Australia there's water in the river and it looks all right, because of artificial pools held up by weirs." She pauses, sighing. "It's the same problem with the drought. It's been raining, people's gardens are green. But many hundreds of kilometres away in Albury there's no water in the Hume dam."

I CATCH UP AGAIN with Malcolm Holm and his family at the Hume dam. There is a yawning gap of cracked red earth at the end of the boat ramp where the water level should be, and the limbs of blackened trees reach skywards. Holm laughs when I tell him that after driving around the region, I'm drowning in arguments about water allocation. "It is very political," he says.

Notwithstanding rain in recent months, the pendulum to a La Niña - a

wet-weather phase, which usually follows an El Niño - has not swung. "And it is unlikely to do so for the rest of the year," says Dr David Jones, head of climate analysis at the Bureau of Meteorology. The drought, the bureau warns, is a long way from breaking and climate change is interfering with a return to wetter conditions. "It will take years to refill the dams."

Living with constant stress inevitably takes its toll, as it did on Holm. What's improbable is how rationally he dealt with the consequences. "I called Jenny on the mobile and told her I'd cut off my hand," he says. It ended up on the ground after going through the whole machine and was taken and preserved by the paramedics. "Luckily it wasn't mangled." Holm was transferred by air to a Sydney hospital. His hand in ice in an esky.

"He amazed me," says Jenny. "On the plane, he kept saying, 'Have you got that esky?'" How did you cope? She shrugs and smiles, her face crumpled from the strain. "He's still alive. I knew we'd be OK."

Five weeks of operations later, Malcolm's hand was sewn back on. As he pulls off the protective glove, his 11-year-old daughter, Ellena screws up her face and looks as queasy as I feel. He points to the bulbous lump on the wrist. "I've got another three operations ahead. There are two tendons to stitch up, pins to remove and a bit of liposuction to get rid of the flap."

Movement is returning as the nerves grow back. "It's the little things," he says, cradling his arm. "I can't do up a button, so we've put velcro on my shirts." At least it's your left hand, I say. He gives a dry smile. "I am left-handed. But I feel lucky. If I was wearing a jumper or a long-sleeved shirt I wouldn't have had an arm at all."

Malcolm hired extra staff, who now depend on his business. What if the drought doesn't break? "We're in a lot of trouble." His eyes narrow. "We have very little fodder. After mid-August, there's no hay left." He half-laughs. "I'm a typical farmer. I just get on with it. Life's always a challenge." ●

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