

# Defending the bush

## The water warriors taking on the irrigation industry

Dan Schulz

**'Rod Thompson should be gut shot and left to die', was written in grey paint on a white steel fence at the boundary of Rod Thompson's 500-acre property.**

Rod didn't go to the police about it. "They don't do anything," he said and besides, the intimidation doesn't bother him. Even if it did, he wouldn't admit it.

"They tried to pull the gate off [my property], then when they couldn't do that, they come along of a nighttime and cut all the hinges off, then cut the gate in half and laid it on the ground. One of them actually threatened to come and smash me face in. I must be a threat to 'em if they want to intimidate me. The only thing I do is chase water issues and the only thing that that's gonna hurt is these cotton farmers."

Threats to Rod's life aren't new to him. In 2014 he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and after battling it for a number of years he decided that if he was well enough, he'd walk the 400km to Thargomindah, a township over the Queensland border on the Bulloo River. In 2017, alone and unassisted, he made the journey to create awareness about the disease. His walking didn't stop there. In 2018 he walked unassisted to Wilcannia, 300km from Bourke, to raise awareness about the plight of the Darling River and the towns that had been without flows for nearly three years.

Thompson began his activism in 2016 when his garden died. Bourke was on water restrictions and the watering of lawns and yards was restricted to two hours a day. "I pulled the Dry Bogan down to water me garden... you can write that if you like," he laughed.

He's referring to a tributary of the Darling River called the Dry Bogan River or Little Bogan, which upstream becomes the Bogan River.

In 2016, the Bogan River was running at Gongolgon, but nothing was coming out at the junction of the Darling and Little Bogan. Rod walked the 24km upstream to collect photo and video evidence of a dam built by a local grazier, which was intersecting the flow of water destined for Bourke.

"NRAR wouldn't do anything about it until I went in there and showed 'em the water running in one end and not running out the other end. I took photos and videos of it and even did a little bit of song with it, 'where does it come from, where does it go... cotton-eyed Joe!'"

NRAR is the Natural Resources Access Regulator established in 2017 to address the non-compliance of water license holders and agricultural infrastructure in NSW.

The landholder was asked to remove the dam by mid-April 2019. In a press release at the end of 2019, NRAR suggested that there would be significant social and environmental benefits to be gained by the removal of the dam. Chief Regulatory Officer Grant Barnes stated that "removal of the dam could potentially improve Bourke's water supply with replenishment flows, as well as re-establish fish passage from the Darling River. Native vegetation and wildlife along the Dry Bogan will also benefit". The Dry Bogan had been dammed for 29 years. Rod believes that the now flowing Dry Bogan had kept Bourke off of water restrictions for six months during the latest spate of water restrictions.

For people who don't live in these arid towns, it is difficult to understand how important water is to the social and mental health of communities. Bourke's highest average temperature is 36 degrees and during the summer season is subject to heat waves of the high forties. During hot weather, there is very little for people to do except stay inside, under their air-conditioning units. Tending to gardens in the early morning or late



Recent rains has seen water in parts of the Menindee Lakes System but people like Rod Thompson in Bourke believe structurally not enough has changed to save our ailing river systems. PICTURES: Dan Schulz

evening is perhaps the only rhythm of activity that keeps residents balanced. So, when Rod says he got the Dry Bogan River running to save his garden, he isn't kidding. Rod's daughter Fleur Thompson, also a 'water watcher' who runs a Facebook page called MumDad which monitors water-related issues, explains, "for some people in Bourke, their garden is everything. Especially for the elderly... to lose your garden because of water restrictions while corporations can take what they want is wrong."

The newly liberated Dry Bogan River was a small win for the town but it was not reported in the local press, nor did it garner much media coverage statewide. Rod suggests this is "partly ignorance. We get rubbished around Bourke by a minority of people that think the saviour for the town is cotton when you know the statistics say cotton supplies maybe five or six or seven jobs per farm. That's not a lot of jobs. But you've got the propaganda machine..."

Rod is referring to the local media; 2WEB radio and its affiliated print newspaper, The Western Herald which was purchased by Jack Buster in 1997, a widely-lauded legend of Bourke cotton. Buster's son-in-law Ian Cole, a former cotton-grower who was investigated by ICAC for his involvement in the 2012 Water Sharing Plan, is the chairman of 2WEB radio and the managing director of the Western Herald. Then there is the alleged collusion between public officials and the irrigation industry with ICAC investigating allegations that NSW public officials were in possible breach of public office during the purchase of water entitlements by the Commonwealth Government. ICAC could find no individual cases of corruption and instead concluded that the department's partiality towards irrigators was a "misguided effort to redress a perceived imbalance caused by the Basin Plan's prioritisation of the environment's needs, which has had adverse effects on irrigators and their communities". In other words, the issue has been conveniently politicised.

There is no better embodiment of this kind of political discourse than in the words of Barnaby Joyce MP, newly reestablished leader of the National Party, who in 2017 was recorded as saying: 'We've taken water and put it back into agriculture so we can look after you and make sure we don't have the greenies running the show basically sending you out the back door. That was a hard ask but we did it'.

People like Rod Thompson and his daughter Fleur are trying to contend with the label of 'greenie'. "It's something that's been contrived for so long that people believe there's a difference between me and someone who wants a

job," Fleur said, "I want a job but it doesn't mean that my job has to be a cost to the environment." This label of 'greenie' is a modern identity and makes little sense to an old Bushie like Rod.

Rod grew up living off of the resources of the land, "as young kids, three meals a week were wild pigeon, Satin bird soup and all that sorta stuff. There was no shops." Protecting the environment is a family tradition born out of a reliance on its health and a responsibility to the land, "My grandfather selected a block up the end of Deep Creek, and he cleared it but not all of it. In those days [1912] you cleared and burned the lot. He kept 15 acres that is still virgin rainforest. Some environmentalists don't even know they're environmentalists."

Rod Thompson typifies this kind of unconscious love for Australia's unique ecosystems, particular the grasslands of western NSW which he romances through the history books, "when [Thomas] Mitchell came [up the Darling River] the Mitchell grass he described as being up to the guts of the horse... unbelievable."

Many of these native grasslands have been decimated by extensive land clearing and over-grazing so during a 100km walk to Brewarrina, Rod collected Mitchell grass seeds and scattered the seeds on his 500-acre block in some effort to restore the grasslands along the river.

Rod Thompson's story exemplifies the fact that regulatory bodies and governments are not adequately equipped to police environmental standards, and ordinary people such as Rod feel they need to take it upon themselves to tell the truth of what is happening to our river systems. In some cases, such people become targets, pariahs and victims as a result. With a dash of cynical humour, a man like Rod Thompson manages these consequences and is comforted by his conviction and the small role he plays in the larger picture, "I'm probably a fingerling in the river. There's a lot of people in all these towns that don't think it's the right thing to do to speak out. I don't understand that. Whatever they do to me I know there's a lot of other people that are like-minded."

With good flows down the Darling this year and water in the Menindee lakes, it is easy to forget that structurally not enough has changed to restore the health of our river systems and create equity between communities. Some claim, such as Maryanne Slattery, that water reforms that include the compromised Basin Plan have actually made things worse in some areas, particularly the Darling River. Contrary to how some politicians and lobbyists would like us to perceive our current situation, rain alone will not save the Darling River.



An aerial photo shows water in the Menindee Lakes System.