

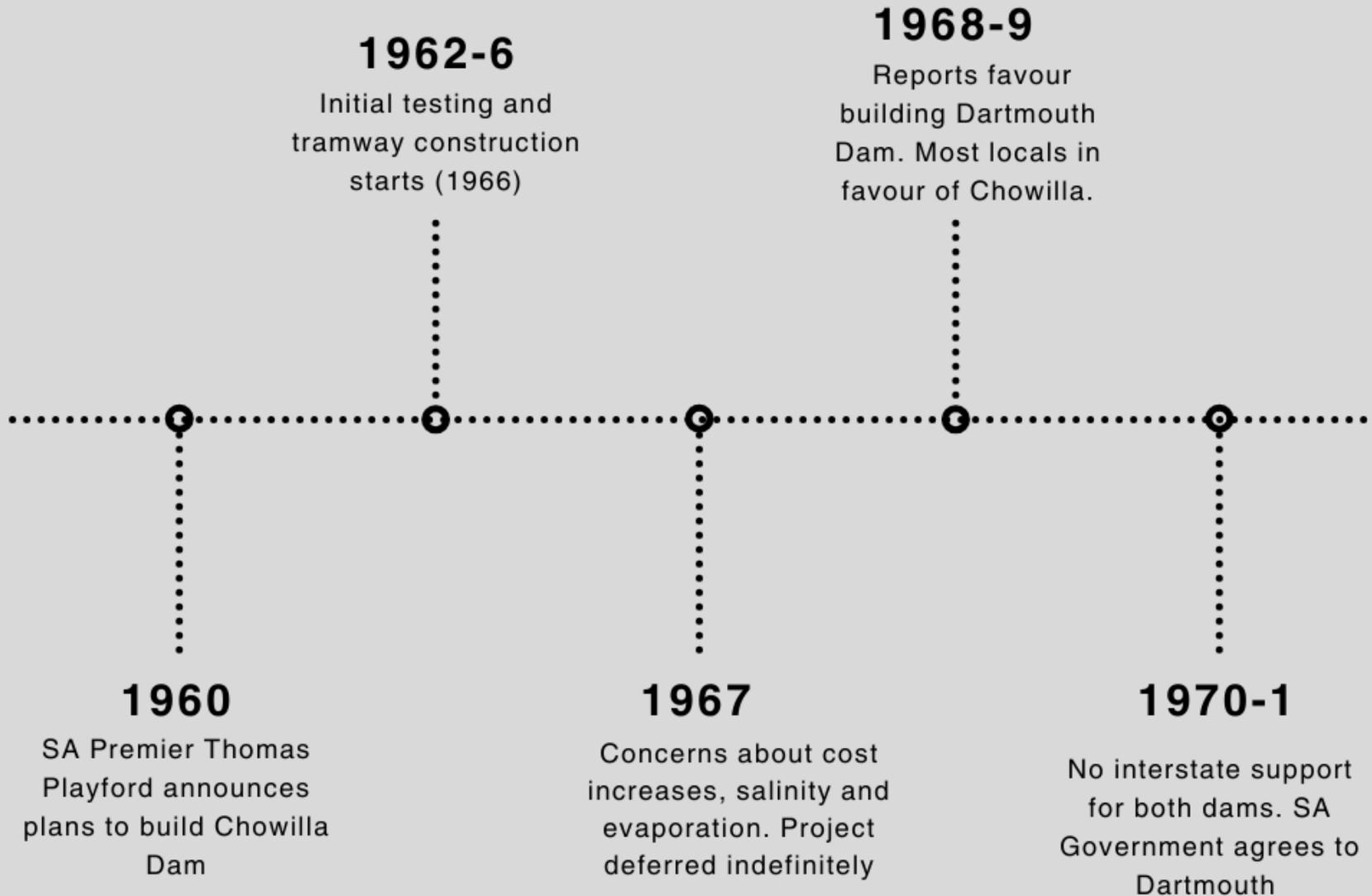
**RENMARK  
IRRIGATION  
TRUST**

**HISTORY  
FESTIVAL  
EVENT**



**DAMMING THE DAM:  
THE CHOWILLA CONTROVERSY AND ITS LEGACY  
1960-1971**

# Timeline



*1958-1960*

*SA Premier Tom Playford advocated for a new Dam to secure water for SA's future prosperity*



Sir Thomas Playford SA Premier 1938-1965

***"We need a dam to ensure that Victoria and NSW do not deny SA's use of the River Murray. If not, by 1970, Victoria and NSW would be using so much of the available water that SA would be left with only a trickle for use"***

# *Role of E&WS Engineers in the Chowilla Dam*



**Julian Dridan**  
EWS Engineer in Chief (1949-1966)

## **Julian Dridan**

- Strong connection to Renmark. His cousin Harold Dridan was RIT secretary from 1936-1945
- SA Member of the River Murray Commission (RMC)
- Promoted need for storage solutions during droughts – “driest state in the driest continent”

## **Harold Beaney**

- Replaced Dridan just before problems emerged
- Weight of evidence now against Chowilla Dam
- Agreed with RMC to consider alternative sites – against Premier Don Dunstan’s position



**Harold Beaney**  
EWS Director and Engineer in Chief (1966-1974)



# Proposed Chowilla Dam site

**Aerial view of the proposed Chowilla dam site in 1967.  
The site of the dam wall would have run for 5km into the left  
background**



# Artist's impression of Chowilla Dam

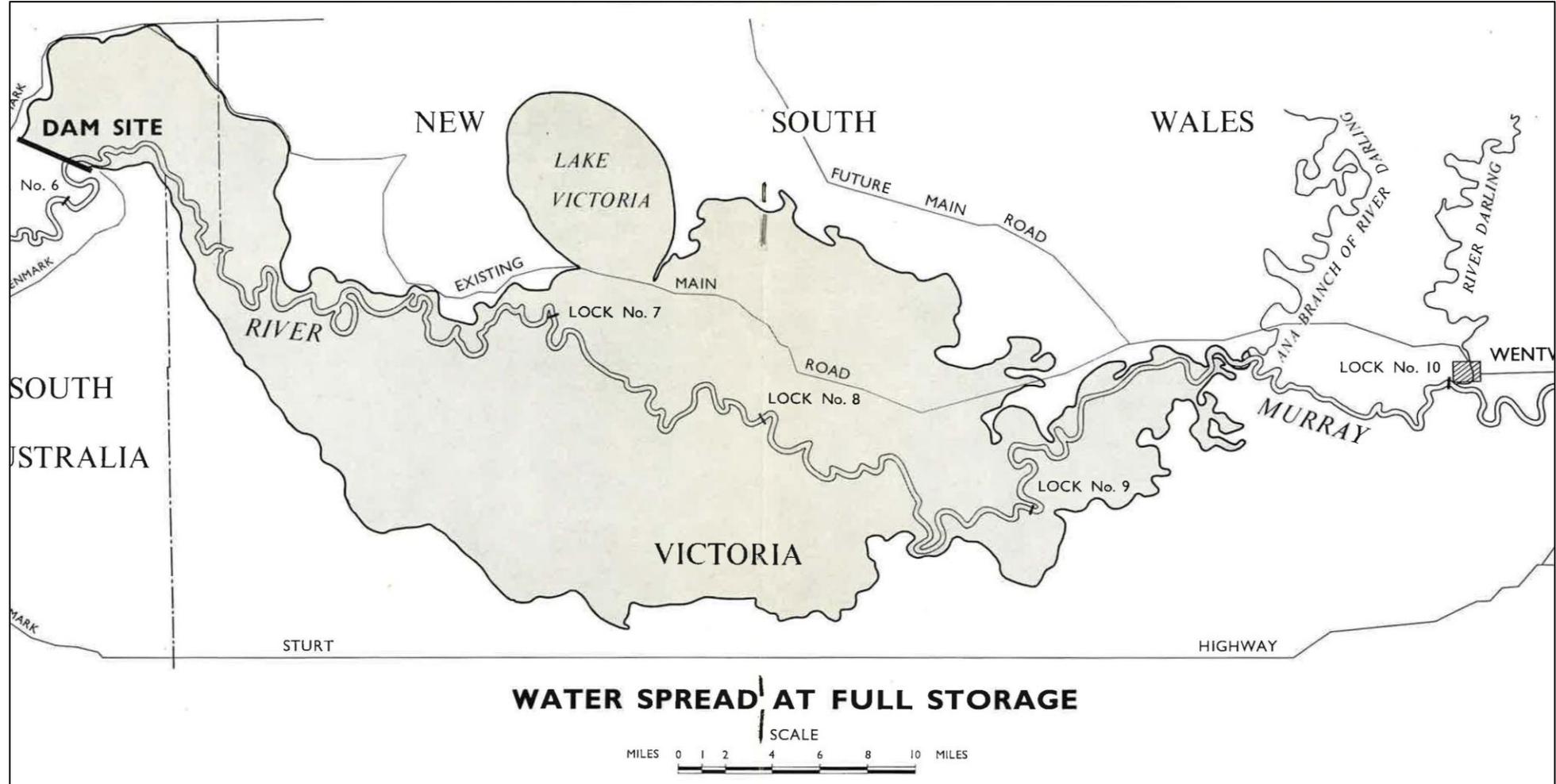


# Proposed Chowilla Dam Project and Tramway

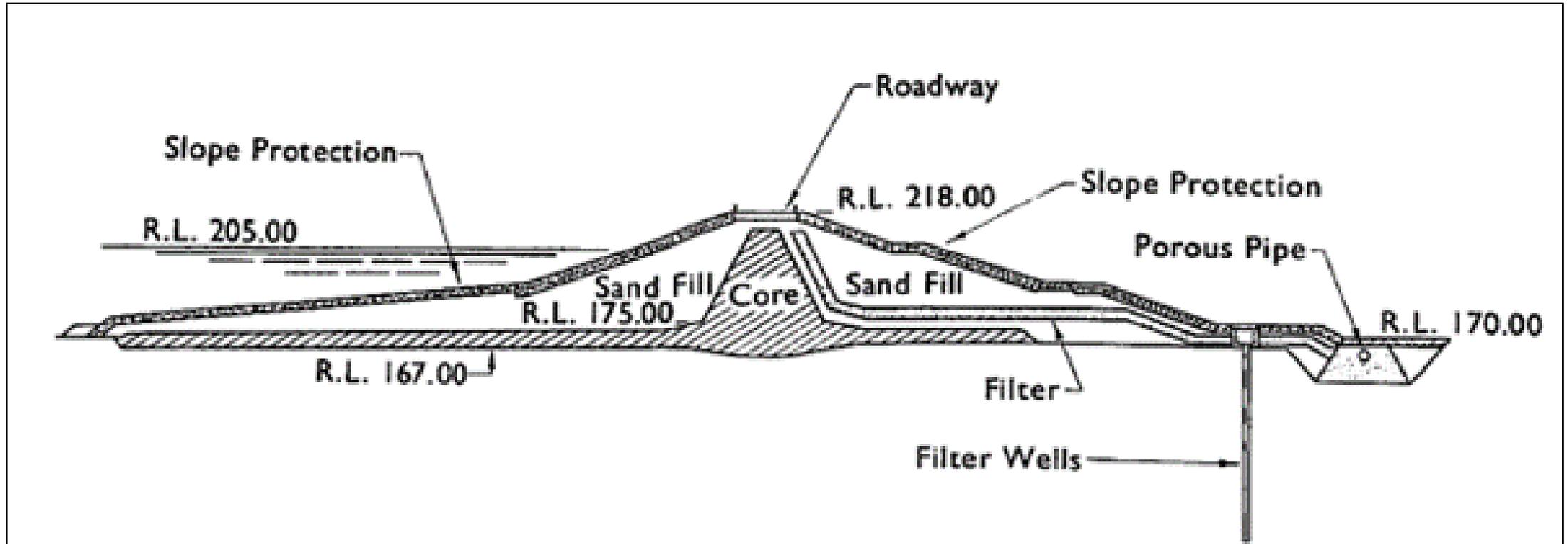
Diagram from Ken Bank's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary booklet  
on the Chowilla Dam project



# Proposed spread of water at full storage 88kms long, 30km wide in places



# 5.5km, 14.6m earth and rock wall to maintain a depth of 10-11 metres above the floodplain



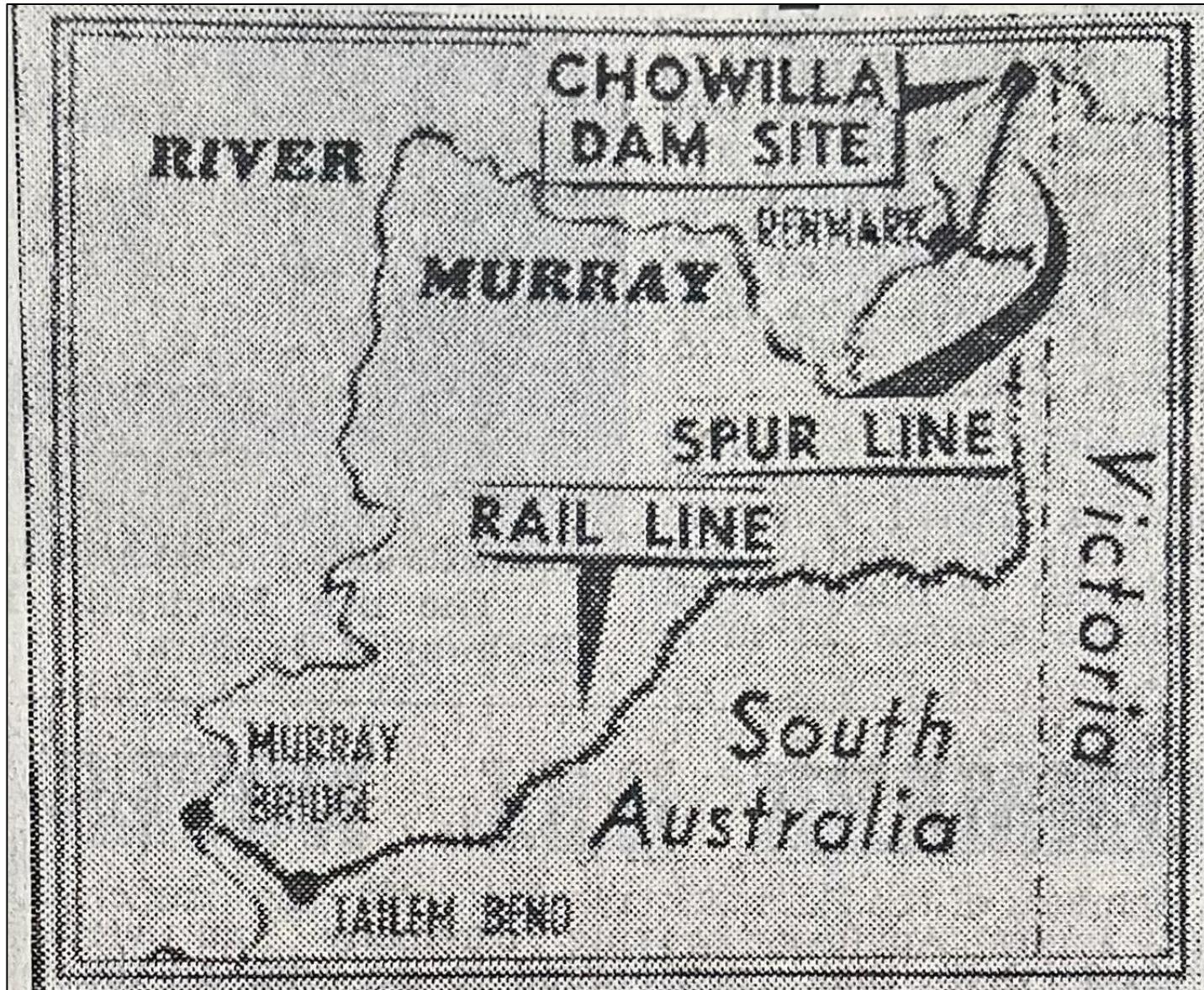
SECTION OF EMBANKMENT





*1963- 5  
Initial investigations:  
boreholes and bitumen testing*

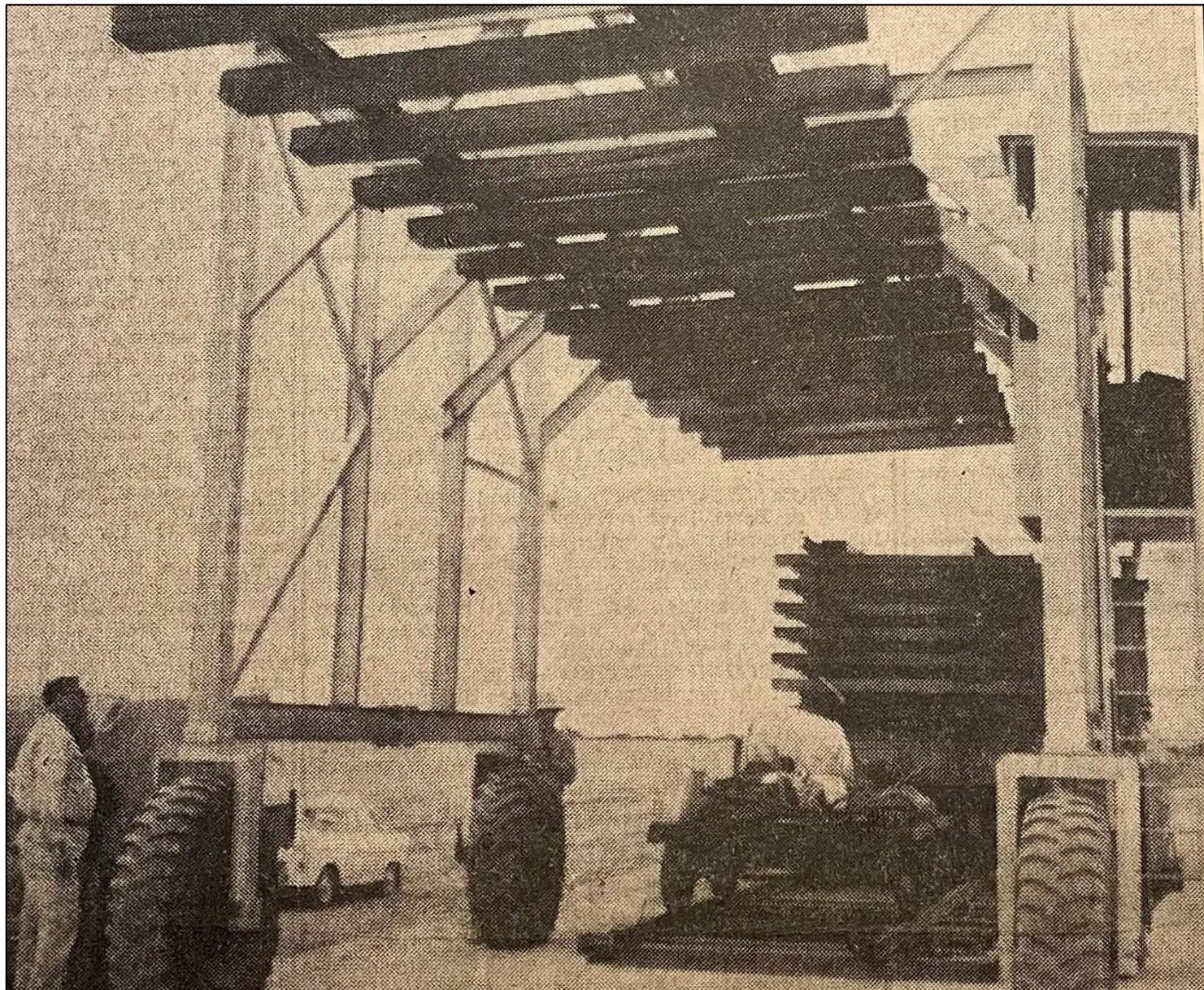




# 1966 *Chowilla Dam tramway*

‘A 20-mile spur railway line will be constructed to the site of the mighty Chowilla Dam’

*Murray Pioneer April 7 1966*



January 1967

## Straddle buggy lays prefab rail sections

“40-foot prefab lengths were constructed at a siding and transported to the site.

A straddle buggy then lifted a section from the truck and laid it in front of the last section which had been laid’

*Murray Pioneer January 26 1967*



**Straddle Buggy on site**



Wagons and hoppers at the only train trip to Chowilla Junction



**Accommodation at Chowilla Village**

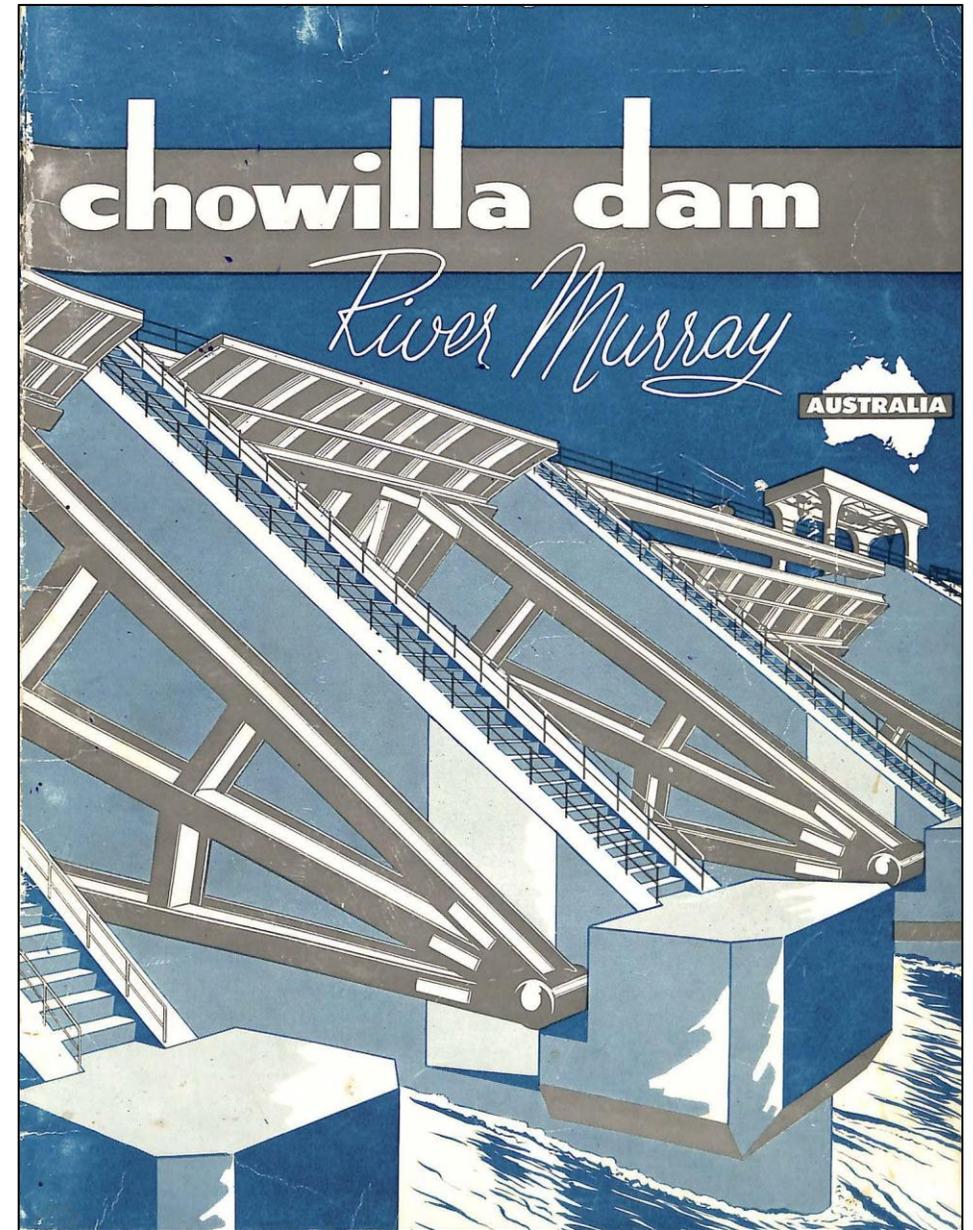
*February 1967 - "Paringa" village*



# *Strong Support from Renmark residents*

"Chowilla will secure our future. We won't have to worry about NSW and Victoria taking all the water."

"This is the best thing for Renmark. It means more jobs, and money coming into the local community."



# *‘Salty’ Jack Seekamp - local voice against Chowilla Dam*

**“If they put Chowilla Dam in and filled it, then from the Dam down to Calperum homesteads, perhaps the Chaffey pumps, the water would have been oozing out of the ground.**

**“The salt water would be forced back into the Creeks and the River Murray”**



*Interview with Jack Seekamp 1998*

*1967*

**Problems emerge**

# *Two Premiers and the fate of Chowilla Dam*



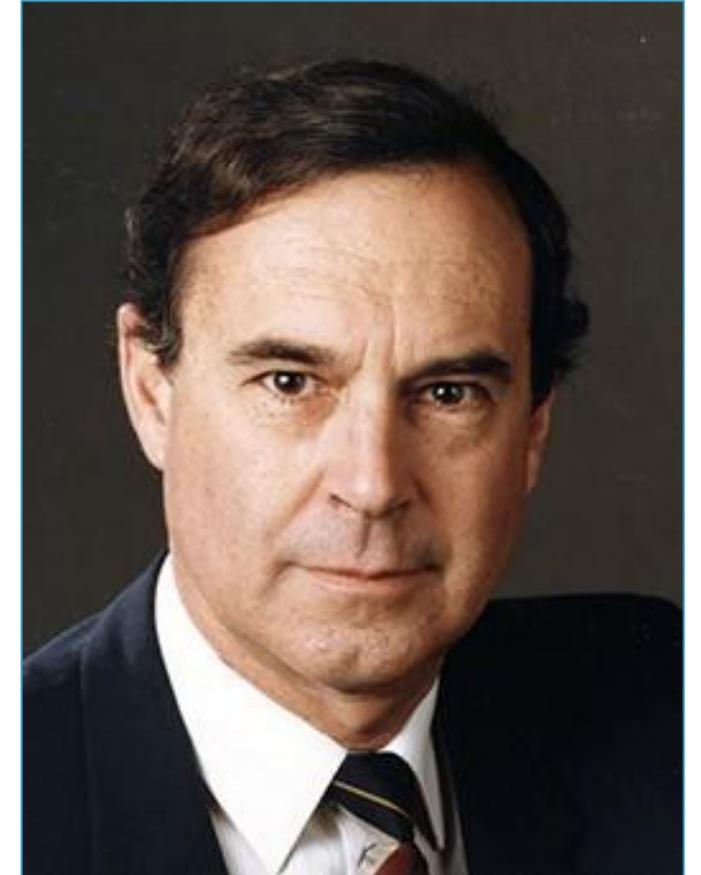
Don Dunstan Premier  
1967-68, 1970-79

**Steele Hall (Premier 1968–1970): LCL**

- Supported then opposed Chowilla Dam due to spiralling costs and environmental concerns.
- Advocated for the Dartmouth Dam as a more viable alternative.
- Political rift with independent MP Tom Stott, contributed to the fall of his minority government.

**Don Dunstan (Premier before and after Hall, notably from 1970): ALP**

- Supported 2 Dams. Later accepted the shift to the Dartmouth Dam
- Negotiated an increase in SA's water
- Oversaw the official shelving of the Chowilla Dam project.



Steele Hall Premier  
April 1968- June 1970

# August 1967 – work on Chowilla deferred indefinitely

*“If Chowilla is abandoned, I wouldn't want to depend on a living in SA in the 2000s”*

*“Canberra and Melbourne control the Murray. South Australia always gets the short end of the deal.”*

*“Dunstan caved in too easily. Playford would never have let this happen.”*

YOUR FAVOURITE BRANDY



**ST AGNES**  
BRANDY

## The Murray Pioneer

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED THE LOXTON CLARION AND MURRAY LANDS GUARDIAN  
Registered at G.P.O., Adelaide, for transmission by post as a newspaper

Vol. 75 No. 33      Renmark, Berri, Barmera, Loxton, Waikerie      Thurs., Aug. 17, 1967

# Chowilla Dam Postponement Big Blow to S.A.

## Statement by Mayor

The Mayor of Renmark (Mr. L. G. Sims) echoed the feelings of disappointment felt generally in the SA River districts when he commented on the latest development regarding the Chowilla Dam project.

Mr. Sims said today that Renmark was not only shocked but saddened by the recent report on the Chowilla Dam project. "Renmark", he said, "shares common problems with all other Upper Murray communities, and among the gravest is the declining quality of our irrigation water."

"I believe we have displayed a patient optimism and laid our entire faith on the trend of events over the last five years. "In this time, the best in engineering brains and the better of five million dollars have proven to all concerned that Chowilla is a feasible, practicable project. So much so, that the Federal Government and three States had jointly agreed to share a cost estimated at that time. "Our optimism has been founded on the anticipated reality of the Chowilla Dam by 1970, giving renewed hope for the future. "Our friendly neighbours across the border agree that much is to be gained and that they will share in the advantages but none will view Chowilla adaptation as does South Australia — as a means to avert disaster."

"I believe", he said, "that our hopes with the strength of our State in standing firm on our claims for Chowilla. Also, we depend on the unselfish attitude of our neighbouring States in this vital matter."

## EISTEDDFOD

The 25th annual Eisteddfod will begin in the Renmark Institute next Monday night, when the Mayor (Mr. L. G. Sims) will per-

The announcement last Friday by the River Murray Commission that work on the Chowilla Dam project had been deferred indefinitely came as a great shock to South Australia and to the River Murray districts in this State in particular.

The news of this threat to SA's future water supply has given rise to expressions of disappointment and dismay on all sides, and strong approaches by the Premier (Mr. Dunstan) and State Parliament on the matter.

The Premier stated on Monday that he had approached the River Murray Commission through the Engineer-in-Chief of the E & WS Department (Mr. H. L. Beavey) had addressed Cabinet on the matter after his return from the meeting of the commission.

Mr. Dunstan explained that other members of the commission had not been prepared to let contracts for the building of the 5 million acre feet capacity dam at this stage, and that, in order to keep the Chowilla project alive the SA commissioner had been forced to agree to the further studies called for.

## COMMISSION'S REASONS

The reason given by the commission for its action in suspending operations on the dam was firstly, which, from an original estimate of \$28m, had increased to \$43m two years ago, and was now shown by the tender price to be \$70m.

Three other factors had also arisen, stated Mr. Beavey in his report. They were:

- (1) Since the dam was originally approved for design, it had been shown clearly that certain minimum flows must be maintained at Mildura to retain the dam.

(2) The evaporation loss since the Chowilla Dam was much greater than assumed in 1962.

(3) The capacity of the Blowering Dam had been increased markedly.

The commissioners therefore wished to investigate some other way of assuring the water SA needed in dry years. The engineer for the River Murray Commission, Mr. G. L. Harrison, of Melbourne, has been quoted as having denied that the project had been "shelved indefinitely"—the "deferral was simply a continuation of the delay the commission had called for when tenders were received in May."

The computer study made since then had revealed new problems and many changed conditions since the original investigations which had begun in 1962.

SA would continue to get its entitlement of a minimum 1,254,000 acre feet of water a year.

## GOVERNMENT ACTION

The Premier stated on Monday that he had approached the Prime Minister (Mr. Holt) by telephone on the matter, and he (Mr. Holt) had given an assurance that the Federal Government would "careful consideration" to SA's claims.

On Tuesday, the House of Assembly unanimously

passed a resolution calling on the Commonwealth, NSW and Victorian Governments to give an assurance that sufficient water would be available for SA needs pending the construction of the Chowilla Dam.

The Federal Minister for National Development (Mr. Fairbairn) who is chairman of the River Murray Commission, is reported as having stated that there was no doubt that the project would have been proceeded with if the cost had remained within reasonable limits of the original estimate of \$28m. However, the big increase had made a reassessment inevitable.

A preliminary investigation he said had indicated that the situation might be met by a smaller dam or a dam at another site.



## Citrus Growers Indenture will

Shareholders of the Murray C at an adjourned special general meeting fixed an agreement, on an amended b

The original indenture was amended by reducing the basic fee payable by SA Citrus Sales Pty. Ltd. from \$25,000 to \$17,500. This fee is payable to MCGCA in return for the use of the Riverland trade name, overseas and interstate business interests, the transfer of all trained personnel and established offices for the exclusive use of SA Citrus Sales Pty. Ltd.

The agreement, as presented, represents months of negotiation between the SA Citrus Organization Committee and the MCGCA. The original special meeting of shareholders had been held at Barmera

## ORANGE WEEK CELEBRATIONS

Orange Week in the Upper Murray officially commenced on Tuesday, and at Renmark in particular a very interesting programme of events got under way.

The opening of the week was held on Tuesday night in conjunction with an art exhibition arranged by the Adult Education Centre in the old Ozone Theatre (new AEC headquarters).

In performing the ce-

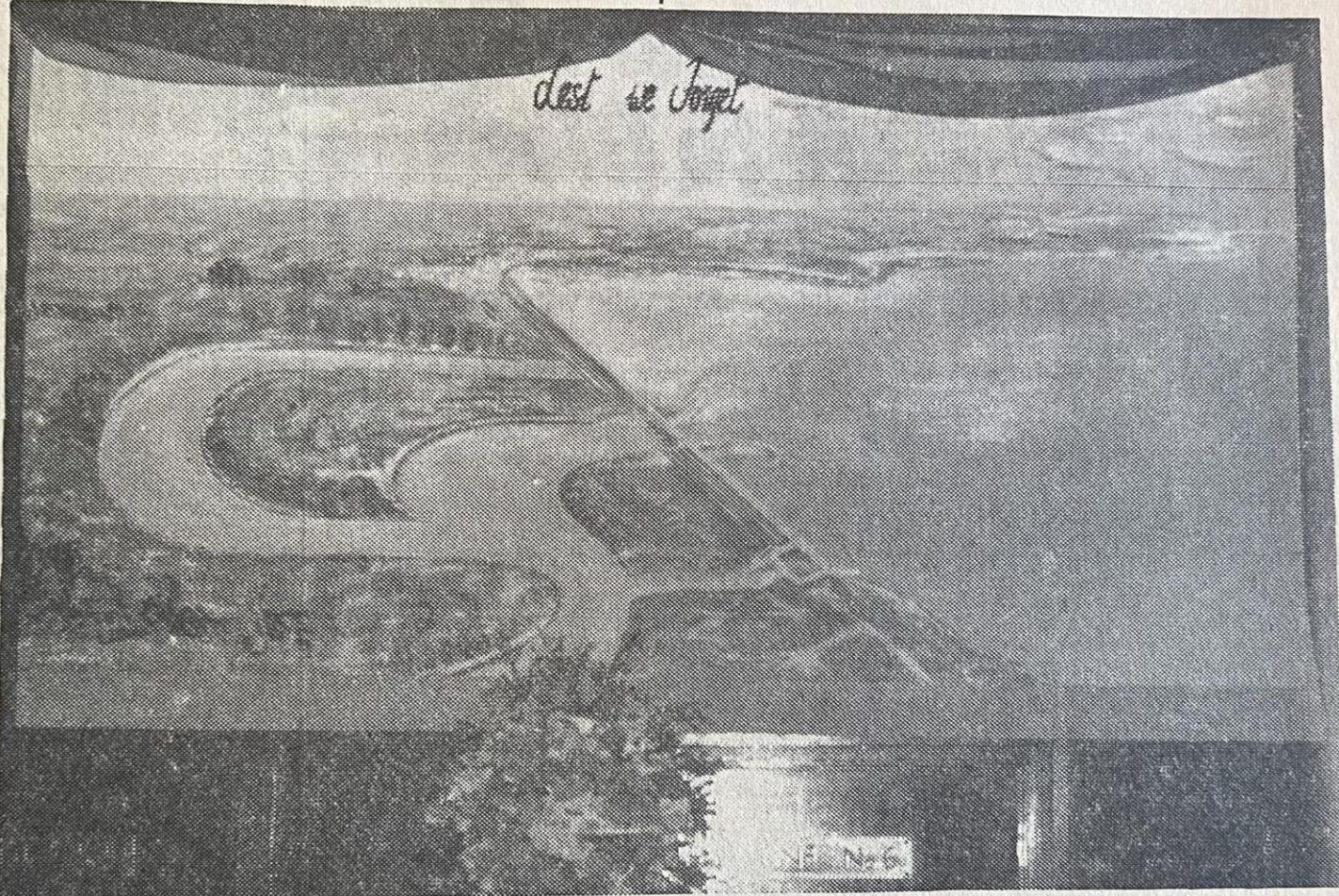
centre for the town. The annual exhibitions had proved very worthwhile for local artists, whose works are shown side by side with those of more renowned artists such as the Malayana singer, painter, Tushar Kanti-Paul. A vote of thanks was extended to both Mr. Sims

in order to clarify a legal point in the indenture. When the meeting resumed on Monday, the association president (Mr. R. L. Andrew) who was on the chair, opened the meeting by saying it appeared as though he owed shareholders an apology for the manner in which he had adjourned the original meeting.

He said, "I genuinely thought I had the right, particularly as the suggestion of extracting my percentage came from the floor of the meeting. However, whether acted rightly or wrongly my conscience is clear as I have since

## DAM THEME

"THE MURRAY PIONEER", Thurs., Aug. 24, 1967—15



A BLACK DRAPE frames a painting of the proposed Chowilla Dam, which was hung in the foyer at the Renmark Hotel, during Orange Week. At the time it was hung, Renmark people were looking to the benefits of flow from Chowilla Dam, but then the news broke and the words "Lest We Forget" and a wreath bearing the wording "In Deepest Sympathy" were added, expressing local feeling in a nutshell. The hotel manager (Mr. Stan Rickards) was responsible for the touch of "humour", which has been widely publicised.

*Words 'Lest we forget' on the painting of the proposed Chowilla Dam  
Renmark Hotel August 1967 – a week after the postponement*

## *Key concerns:*

**Cost blowouts:** \$28 million skyrocketed to \$68 million.

**Salinity risks:** newer studies suggested that the dam could worsen salt buildup in the water table.

**Evaporation losses:** the dam's vast surface area would lead to significant water loss, making it inefficient.

*1968 - 69  
Chowilla or  
Dartmouth?*

April 1968

# RIT supports Chowilla

“RIT gives its full support to the Chowilla Dam proposal believing any difficulties can be adequately provided for by the eminently qualified persons engaged by the River Murray Commission”

“The River Murray people want Chowilla and the State needs Chowilla urgently”

## Irrigation Trust Stresses Support for Chowilla

The chairman of the Renmark Irrigation Trust (Mr. S. W. Heritage) issued a statement today stressing the trust's support for the Chowilla Dam project.

Mr. Heritage said that much had been written, and many opinions expressed during recent months on the proposal to construct the dam.

However, little representative opinion has been expressed from sections of the community which would stand to benefit if the project eventuated — namely the irrigators and persons associated with commerce and industry in the district.

In this connection, he said, the Renmark Corporation was a notable exception, having made its support for the dam quite plain.

The Renmark Irrigation Trust, which controlled the oldest irrigation settlement in the Commonwealth, and the largest irrigation area in South Australia (with 10,000 acres of horticultural plantings under irrigation) was most conscious of the future prospects for the district, and strongly supported the views expressed by Sir Thomas Playford in his recent article, "Why Chowilla is Essential".

While the various reasons for the deferment of the project were the subject of a thorough re-consideration of the proposal by qualified engineering specialists, said Mr. Heritage, it would be unfortunate if outside issues out-weighed a recommendation by these specialists favouring the Chowilla proposal.

It was a great pity that the personnel most closely associated with the venture had not commented on the prospects of increased salinity in the river, arising from the future construction of the dam in its proposed location.

Too often, silence was interpreted as acquiescence and treated accordingly by public opinion.

Our climate and soils had proved that South Australia can produce world quality citrus, dried and canned fruits and wine and there was room for expansion of irrigation in certain directions, including wine grapes and pastures — the latter to succor and save the State's livestock in drought years.

Commonwealth revenue from excise on wine and brandy production in Renmark alone was nearly \$1,000,000 per year. Commonwealth finances stood to gain, therefore, if further plantings could be brought into production in this and adjacent districts.

Mr. Heritage stressed that Chowilla would be ideally situated to impound water from any section of the catchment of the Murray and Darling system, since all must eventually flow past this site on entering South Australia — and was the only site; e.g. in the 1890 flood nearly all run-off was from the Darling and was lost out to sea.

Renmark, he said, was a district of fighters — fighters in the sense of the struggle which faced its pioneers as an aftermath of the Chaffey Brothers' failure; fighters in another sense, with its highest ratio of enlistment to population in Australia in two World Wars; fighters against too much water during the record flood of 1956; fighters for a proposal for the safeguarding of a supply of water to maintain the prosperity of its inhabitants.

"The Renmark Irrigation Trust", he said, on behalf of its ratepayers, gives its full support to the proposal to construct a dam at Chowilla, believing that any difficulties in its construction or operation can be adequately provided for by the eminently qualified personnel engaged for the purpose by the River Murray Commission.

### Salient Points

Salient points in the trust's stand on the Chowilla project could be listed as follows, said Mr. Heritage:

1. Flood mitigation — to take damaging peaks off approaching floodwaters.
2. S.A. would benefit from more direct control of Murray waters.
3. Water would be immediately available for flushing the river at short call to alleviate salinity.
4. Possible benefits had already been demonstrated by Lake Victoria storage.
5. Support was given by the RIT to the State government, urging strong and vigorous approach.
6. "The River Murray people want Chowilla, and the State needs Chowilla urgently".

### Temperatures

APRIL	Min.	Max.
11	62.7	82.9
12	63.2	83.8
13	62.9	83.7
14	58.1	90.0
15	64.8	77.8
16	57.8	79.2
17	59.4	78.5

### DATES TO REMEMBER

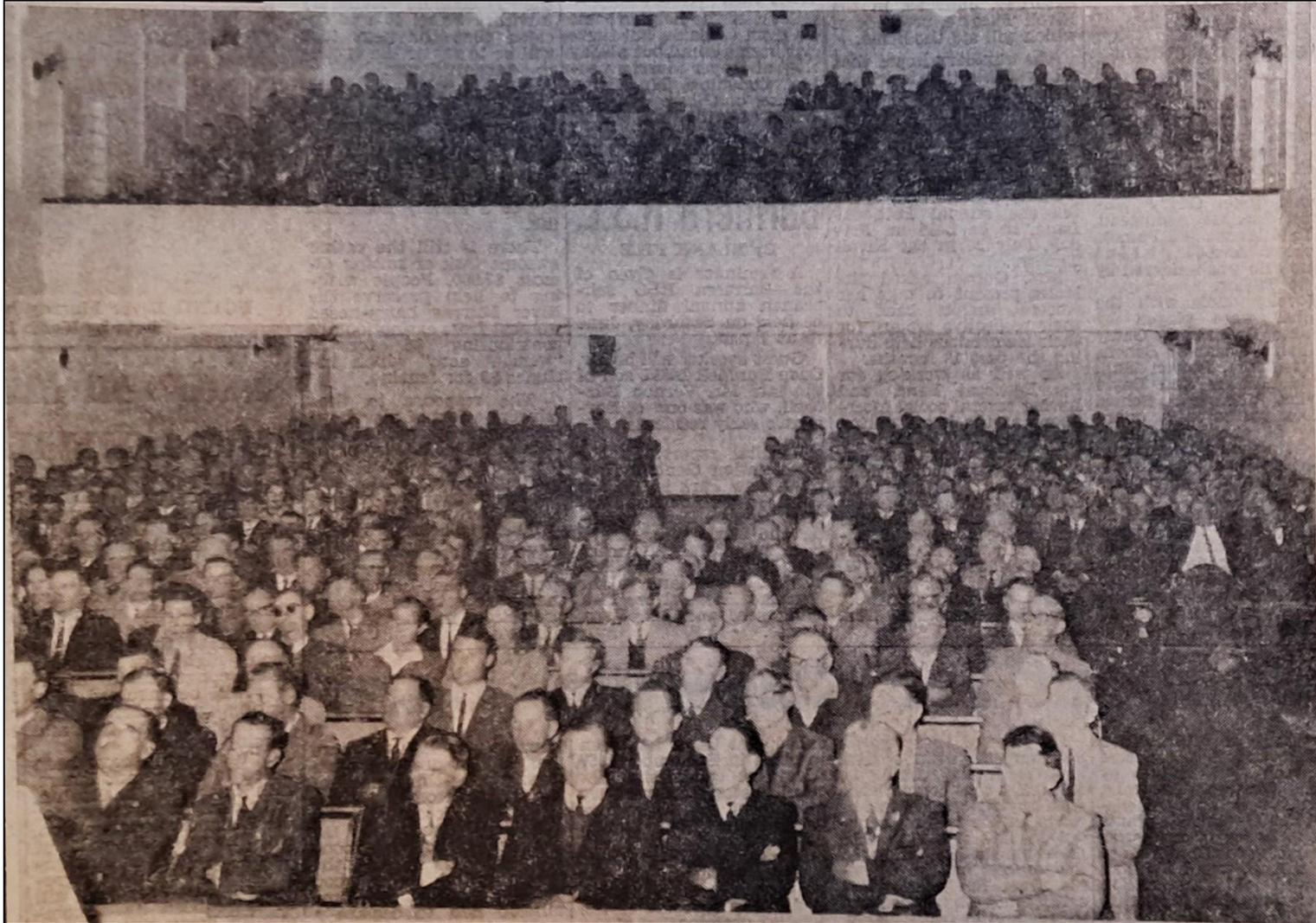
Apr. 19 — Renmark R.S.L. dinner.  
Apr. 19 — Teenage Dance, Renmark Institute.  
Apr. 19 — Renmark C.W.A. meeting.  
Apr. 20 — Monash fortnightly Dance.  
Apr. 20 — U.M. Philatelic Soc. meeting.  
Apr. 20 — Berri Hockey Club practice.  
Apr. 21 — Cobdogga Tennis Club closing day.  
Apr. 22 — Renmark Boy Scouts Parents meeting.  
Apr. 23 — Barmera Homes for Aged annual meeting.  
Apr. 23 — S.A. Field and Game Assoc. gen. meeting.  
Apr. 26 — Learners' Dancing Classes, Faringa Hall.  
Apr. 25 — "The Dawn Service, Renmark."  
Apr. 26-27 — Renmark Floricultural Society Floral Exhibition.  
Apr. 27 — Rotary-Apex charity auction, Renmark.  
Apr. 27 — Openings of new courts, Faringa oval.  
Apr. 26 — Berri Swim Club annual meeting.  
May 2, 3 & 4 — Bell, Book & Candle, Ren. Little Theatre.  
May 3 — Renmark Guide Film evening.  
May 4 — Renmark Pre-School buffet dinner.  
May 5 — Lyrup Fishing competition.  
May 27 — A.D.P.A. State Conference, Barmera.  
May 30 — B-M Football Club Carnival Queen dance, Monash.  
**MARKETS AND AUCTIONS**  
Apr. 22 — Property auction, Loxton - H. W. King & Co.  
Apr. 29 — Auction of 5 Oolton properties - J. F. Sharkey.  
May 3 — Fruit property auction, New Residence - H. D. Rooney & Son.

### ANZAC CO SERVICES

Three Upper M  
oration Services th

*June 1968*

*600 attend Berri meeting to support Chowilla*



**Premier Steele Hall**

**“My government will stand firmly behind the Chowilla Dam scheme”**

**“Chowilla must be built”**

*The Murray Pioneer June 13 1968 Rivoli Theatre Berri*

March 1969

Premier Steele Hall now supports Dartmouth at Renmark meeting – 450 attend

“Premier Steele Hall: I have only changed my attitude on the basis of technical reports.”

“River residents are far from happy – once the strong man Bolte (Victorian Premier) gets the OK for Dartmouth, Chowilla will be dead.”

The Murray Pioneer March 20 1969, Ozone Theatre Renmark

**Angove's**  
mature perfection  
VINTAGE PORT

**The Murray Pioneer**  
WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED THE LOXTON CLARION AND MURRAY LANDS GUARDIAN  
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Vol. 77 No. 12  
Renmark Berri, Barmera, Loxton, Waikerie.  
Thurs., March 20, 1969

# Premier Explains Dam Policy To Big Meeting

## Discussion Prior to Meeting

The Minister of Works (Mr. J. W. H. Coumbe), left, talks with the Premier (Mr. Hall) centre, and the Member for Chaffey (Mr. P. B. Arnold) prior to the public meeting at Renmark on Tuesday night.

**AGGREGATE WINNERS IN M. L. ANNUAL MEETING**

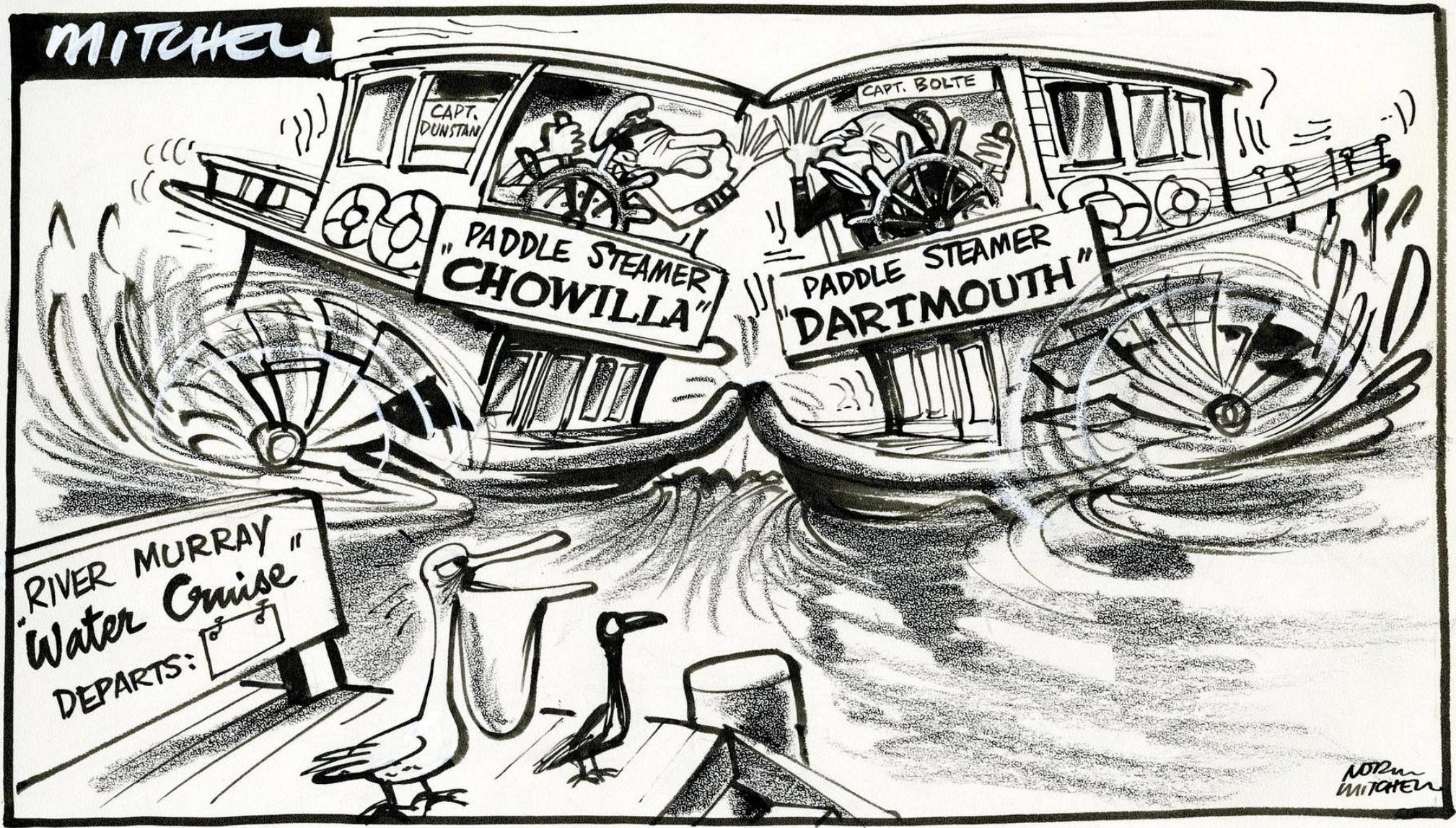
Winners of sections of the 1969 Murray Lands Ag...

The announcement was made in calling the annual meeting of the society held at Swan Reach last Friday.

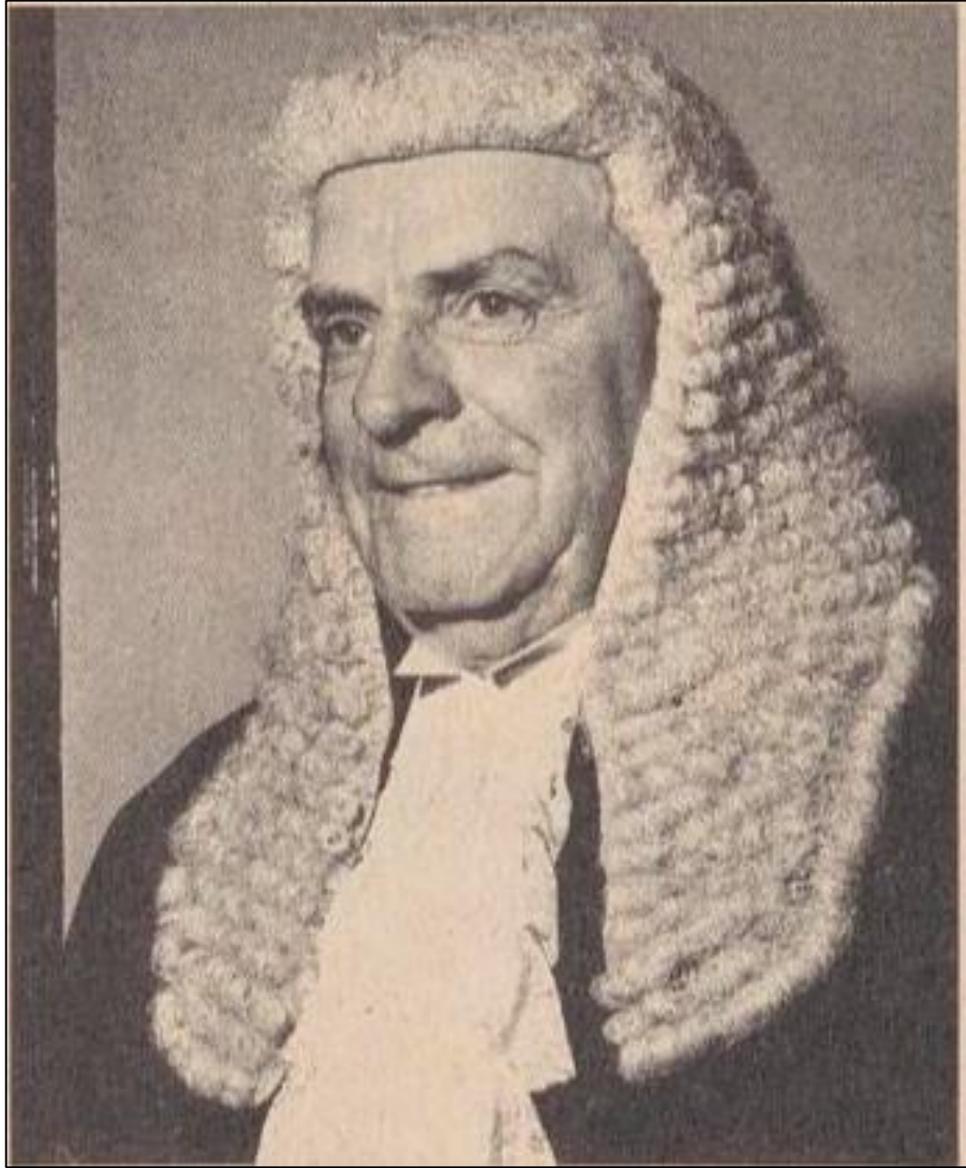
The aggregate winners are as follows: Dairy cattle, L. J. Dohnt, of Borrioka; beef cattle, P. W. and H. S. Wurnt, of Loxton; pigs, P. G. Zimmermann, of Taplan; sheep, M. G. Dohse and Son, Paringa; wool, R. R. Edson and Son, of Blanchetown; poultry, G. L. Mangelsdorf, of Murray Bridge; flowers, D. W. Ruston, of Renmark; needlework, Mrs. I. Kroehn, of Nildottle; cookery, Mrs. R. L. Prentice, of Yurgo; vegetables, K. and M. Trimper, of Renmark.

The Rural Youth display trophy, it was announced, has been won by the Pinnaroo Junior Rural Youth Club.

Mr. Hall faced an audience of some 450 people, including a number from other River centres, who packed the Ozone Theatre at the next election." Sir Thomas Playford had questioned the political implications of the reports, but when matters become



Dam Debate – SA v Victoria



Tom Stott, member for Ridley 1933-1970

## *April 1970*

Hall Government defeated on a vote to ratify Dartmouth Dam instead of Chowilla on the casting vote of the Independent Tom Stott.

ALP returned to power in July 1970.

# 1970-1971

New Premier, Don Dunstan, supported Dartmouth but failed to convince Victoria, NSW and the Federal governments to construct Chowilla Dam as well.



Proposed Chowilla Dam site in 1967 showing Chowilla village and tramway [The Advertiser 22 December 2017](#)

# *1971 -Dartmouth Dam to proceed*

**Don Dunstan:**

“Under the Amending Agreement, Chowilla will be looked at as possible future storage, not on the basis of the protections it can give to SA.

**This is a sad thing for South Australia, since the Dartmouth Dam will not provide immediate water protection, will take years to build and even more years to store water.”**



*Press Statement from the Premier Don Dunstan 19 August 1971*

# *Chowilla Dam Legacy*

Indicated growing influence of environmental considerations in public policy.

Prevented inundation of wetland areas which are now protected.

End of dam infrastructure projects in SA but **not** the end of controversy about how Australia should manage its water resources.



*Photo of Chowilla Floodplain MDBA website March 2025*