



National Irrigators' Council

*Food and fibre for the Nation*

# National Irrigators' Council

Annual Report 2015-16



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Thermal Curtain, Burrendong Dam, NSW*

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# National Irrigators' Council

The National Irrigators' Council (NIC) is the peak body representing irrigators in Australia, supporting 29 member organisations across the Murray Darling Basin states, irrigation regions and the major agricultural commodity groups. NIC members collectively hold approximately 5,000,000 megalitres of water entitlement.

NIC is the voice of irrigated agriculture and the industries producing food and fibre for domestic consumption and significant export income. Our policy and advocacy is dedicated to a viable and productive irrigated agriculture sector in Australia. The total gross value of irrigated agriculture in Australia in 2014-15 was \$15.1 billion {ABS}. The sector produces milk, fruit, vegetables, rice, grains, sugar cane, nuts, wine, meat and cotton.

NIC is funded by irrigators, for irrigators and the communities they support. NIC is directed by our guiding principles designed to underpin our current and future policy decisions:

- A healthy environment is paramount
  - Sustainable communities and industries depend on it
- Protect or enhance water property rights
  - Characteristics of water entitlements should not be altered by ownership
- No negative third party impacts on reliability or availability
  - Potential negative impacts must be compensated or mitigated through negotiation with affected parties
- Irrigators must be fully and effectively engaged in the development of relevant policy
- Irrigators expect an efficient, open, fair and transparent water market
- Irrigators require a consistent national approach to water management subject to relevant geographical and hydrological characteristics
- Irrigators expect Government policy to deliver triple bottom line outcomes
- Regulatory and cost burdens of reform be minimised and apportioned equitably.

## Strategic Objectives

NIC policy focus is underpinned by its strategic objectives, developed by members.

**Vision:** Our vision is for a vibrant and sustainable irrigation industry.

**Mission:** Our mission is to secure the long term interests of our members and our industry.

### Objectives:

- Continue to be recognised by Government and industry as the national peak body for irrigated agriculture
- Protect or enhance water as a property right
- Promote the importance of irrigated agriculture.



**Wheat crop ready for harvest, Southern Riverina**  
*Copyright Murray Irrigation Ltd*

# Our Members

Our members represent a diversity of organisations from food and fibre industries and irrigation infrastructure operators. Council members are not individual irrigators but members of their respective representative organisations.

The Council is a non-federated body with equal voting rights on all issues including policy development. The Council is committed to representing all irrigators regardless of their location or the food and fibre they produce. Council members meet face to face three times per year to discuss and develop key policy. Adoption of policy is on a consensus basis.

## Membership

Almond Board of Australia  
Barossa Infrastructure Ltd  
Border Rivers Food and Fibre  
Central Downs Irrigators Limited  
Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited  
Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association Inc  
Lachlan Valley Water  
Murray Irrigation Ltd  
Murrumbidgee Groundwater  
Murrumbidgee Irrigation Ltd  
Olam Orchards Australia Pty Ltd  
Renmark Irrigation Trust  
Riverina Winegrapes Marketing Board  
South Australian Murray Irrigators  
Western Murray Irrigation Limited

Auscott Limited  
Blue Sky Water Partners  
Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group  
Central Irrigation Trust  
Cotton Australia  
Kilter Rural  
Macquarie River Food and Fibre  
Murray Goulburn Co-operative Co Ltd  
Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators' Inc  
Namoi Water  
Pioneer Valley Water Co-operative Ltd  
Ricegrowers' Association of Australia Inc  
Smartrivers  
Southern Riverina Irrigators



# The Board

The Board manages the business and affairs of the Council. The CEO is responsible for the day to day operations of the organisation. The Board includes a mix of state representation and skills-based experience. With a presence in Canberra, the Board and the organisation more broadly, has direct access to decision makers, ensuring the voice of those involved in irrigated agriculture is heard across Australia.



## **Gavin McMahon (Chair)**

Gavin is the CEO of Central Irrigation Trust (CIT) in South Australia. He is also a Director of CIT and the CIT Water Exchange. Gavin originally hails from Queensland and has formal qualifications in environmental science and business. Gavin was appointed to National Irrigators' Council Board in 2010 and to the position of Chairman in 2012.



## **Michael Murray (Treasurer)**

Michael is the General Manager for Cotton Australia and was formerly Chief Executive Officer of the Gwydir Valley Irrigators' Association, based in Moree in northern NSW. Michael is also a board member of NSW Irrigators' Council. He was elected to the NIC board in 2009.



## **Tim McKindlay (Deputy Chair)**

Tim is a director of Murray Irrigation Ltd, the largest private irrigation company in Australia. Tim and his family run a mixed cropping and livestock operation near Deniliquin in NSW. Tim was elected to the Board of the National Irrigators' Council in 2012.



## **Bernie George**

Bernie was elected to the NIC board in 2012. He is the General Manager of Auscott's water portfolio. The Company grows and processes, warehouses and markets cotton and rotation crops in the Gwydir, Namoi, Macquarie and Murrumbidgee valleys. Bernie has extensive experience in large scale irrigated agriculture and land and water resource development. He is a past Chairman of Cotton Australia and a graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program.



## **Peter Duggin**

Peter is a winegrape grower from Renmark in South Australia and Chairman of the Renmark Irrigation Trust, Australia's oldest irrigation trust. He was elected to the National Irrigators' Council board as South Australia's representative in 2010. Peter is also a member of the SA MDB NRM Board, and SAMI Upper Murray representative.



**Dale Holliss**

Dale is the CEO of Bundaberg CANEGROWERS Ltd and Company Secretary for the Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group. He has a background in sustainable agricultural management, rural finance and economics. He also has extensive experience in irrigated sugar cane production systems across Queensland as well as a diverse range of horticultural crops. He was elected to the NIC board in 2012. Dale is the Chair of NIC Energy sub-committee, and a Member of the Queensland Canegrowers electricity committee and a Ministerially appointed Member of the Local Management Irrigation Arrangements Board



**Karen Hutchinson**

Karen was elected to the NIC Board in 2014. Karen is part of the senior management at Murrumbidgee Irrigation Limited, one of the largest privately owned irrigation corporations in Australia. She has been at the cutting edge of water policy development for the last decade. Karen is currently a member of the MDBA's Basin Community Committee and a member of the RDA – Riverina Committee. Karen has an Honours degree from the Australian National University, is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and was awarded the prestigious RIRDC NSW Rural Women of the Year in 2011.



**Toby Smith**

Toby was elected to the NIC Board as the Victorian representative in 2015. He is the Commercial Manager for Olam International, one of the largest Almond growers in Australia.



**Chad Prescott**

Chad is a cotton and cattle producer from near St George in south western Queensland. He is the secretary of SmartRivers, a stakeholder organisation representing the interests of irrigators in the Lower Balonne region. Chad is a founding Director of the National Irrigators' Council, initially elected to the Board in 2008.



**John Culleton CSC, psc, pcfsc, BA, GAICD**

John was elected to the NIC Board in 2011. John is a director on the NSW Rice Marketing Board and Chief Executive of Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited (CICL). Previously, John spent 32 years in the Australian Regular Army commanding at platoon, company and battalion level. He has worked in Malaysia, Canada and the USA and served with the UN in the Middle East. His final posting in the Australian Army was as Australia's Defence Attaché to the UN in New York.

After leaving the Army in 2002, John was the NSW/ACT State Manager of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and subsequently the Deputy Chief Investigator of the NSW Office of Transport Safety Investigations.

John is a graduate of the Royal Military Command, Duntroon; the Australian Army Command and Staff College; the Canadian Services Command and Staff College and the Australian Institute of Company Directors. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from UNSW (Economics and Government) and was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross for his leadership and work in the remote communities of Cape York, the Gulf Country and the Torres Strait while commanding the 51<sup>st</sup> Battalion, the Far North Queensland Regiment.

# Message from the Chairman

National Irrigators' Council (NIC) continues to be at the centre of the policy debate to secure a better deal for the sustainability of irrigated agriculture in Australia, inside the Murray Darling Basin and beyond. Our policy and advocacy is guided by the organisation's very clear strategic direction, our key principles, position statements and agreed priorities. NIC's presence in Canberra supports our capacity to influence with direct access to decision makers. Our effectiveness is underpinned by the knowledge and experience of our Members' and their contribution on all levels of policy.



**Gavin McMahon**  
Chairman, National Irrigators' Council

The eight week 2016 federal election campaign and the traditional caretaker conventions, saw an extended period of decision making inactivity. This enabled us to refocus and prepare for the necessary advocacy against the backdrop of the make-up of the new Senate and briefing material for incoming ministers on relevant policy. High on the list are the inter-connected issues relevant to the Basin Plan implementation; progress towards achieving the 650 gigalitre (GL) as part of the SDL Adjustment Mechanism, the Northern Basin Review and the unreal expectations regarding the proposed Constraints Management Strategy.

We have worked to elevate our issues before the Coalition Government and Labor Opposition spokespeople, and to advocate and argue the case on our policies with all parties and Independent Members and Senators. Fundamentally, the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) socio economic work remains an ongoing concern in the context of the Northern Basin review and more generally, little evidence of 'localism' and 'adaptive management' embedded in MDBA reports.

Our efforts to achieve the legislated 1500 GL cap on water buybacks was critical to our Members, their businesses and the social and economic fortunes of rural and regional communities in the Basin.

Following the 2015 Senate Inquiry into the Basin Plan, many of the Senate Select Committee's recommendations reflected NIC's stance on many policy areas. We await the Government's response to the report.

We pushed to secure the legislated changes to the Water Act prior to the Government moving into caretaker mode leading up to the 2016 federal election. The bill passed through the parliament without amendment with many changes incorporating much needed red tape reduction for our sector. The issue yet to be resolved is the ACCC review of Water Charge Rules. NIC made its views known in many forums that the ACCC draft advice tabled in November 2015 was unacceptable and represented a large-scale increase in red tape for no apparent reason or gain, and went against the intent of the Water Act review and the Government's commitment to reducing red tape. We continue to work towards securing a sensible outcome on this matter.

The report of the Interagency Working Group led by the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) titled *Providing Water Information to the Commonwealth* aligns with the Government's drive to reduce red tape and reporting. The report flows from a recommendation by the Water Act Review Expert Panel to reduce the frequency of reporting and the duplication in requests to report for lead water organisations and other agencies of states and territories. NIC Members provided significant input and feedback to the working group and we will remain vigilant to ensure that these measures are implemented in full.

NIC welcomed the Murray Darling Basin Commonwealth and State Ministers (MINCO) agreement in April, for a second notification for supply measure projects to occur at 30 June 2017, under the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) Adjustment Mechanism. This allows for further time to enable the modelling of projects for inclusion to reach 650 GL under the SDL. We have argued for flexibility around timelines that will enable the required work to be done on project proposals brought forward by the states, to gain maximum benefit and to enable all possible supply contributions to be achieved towards meeting the 650 GL. Our expectation is that the SDL Adjustment Mechanism will deliver a full 650 GL of offsets.

The April MINCO meeting also agreed to have non-flow measures, such as carp control, considered as part of the SDL Adjustment Mechanism. The Government's announcement of \$15 million in May for a National Carp Control Plan and the proposed release of a carp herpes virus, set activity in motion to ensure that this initiative is progressed in a manner that will guarantee objectives are met in removing carp from waterways, and to enable native species, when re-stocked, to have every opportunity to thrive and expected benefits to be realised. NIC will continue to put the case for other complementary measures such as management of cold water pollution, improvement of fish migration through fishways along the Barwon-Darling, restoration of native fish habitat and feral animal control.

In an energy rich country like Australia, it is unacceptable that the impact of weak energy policy and unsustainable energy costs are undermining the viability of rural businesses and industries. Energy policy failure is compromising our highly productive and efficient agricultural sector, and destroying our capacity to be a competitive global food producer to put fresh food on the tables of Australian households.

This issue remains at the forefront of NIC's ongoing battle to secure a fairer electricity pricing regime for irrigated agriculture in the national electricity market, and to achieve a reduction in the inflated network costs submitted by electricity network businesses to the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) during the pricing determinations process. We have a long way to go on this issue within its many and complex component parts. I commend our Energy sub-committee in tackling the relevant pieces of work in driving this effort. As state governments progress their aggressive policies to transition to renewables, NIC has been vocal in pushing for a coordinated energy transition plan through COAG, to ensure reliable and affordable electricity is available to the food and fibre producing sector. We also remain committed to identify alternative energy solutions for the sector, focusing on a water energy productivity program designed to fund and accelerate the adoption of energy solutions.

While we await the outcome of the Northern Basin review anticipated in November, I commend members of the NIC Northern Basin group for their relentless pursuit to achieve a sensible review outcome. Northern Basin communities should not be called upon to withstand further social and economic erosion as they pay the price for the deeply flawed 'just add water' approach. It is a wake-up call when the MDBA's own research reveals the impact on Northern Basin communities from water buybacks, where full-time agriculture job losses of up to 35% are anticipated for some communities. The early results of the research also show that the environmental benefits of water recovery, in addition to the current level of recovery, are limited.

The MDBA socio-economic work as it stands is unsatisfactory and we will continue to argue for a balance between social, environmental and economic outcomes – and to make the case against the 'just add water' approach. We must be confident that technical assumptions can be proven and fully explained, and that the promised principles of adaptive management and 'localism' are properly reflected in all policy decisions. Stakeholders and communities must see evidence that environmental water is properly used for the intended purposes, otherwise communities will continue to bear the brunt of a Basin Plan that is unsatisfactory.

The organisation's three face to face Council meetings each year provide a forum for Members to debate issues and do a stocktake on the focus of our advocacy. Recognising the diversity of our membership, we endeavour to understand the issues that most affect Members in their respective businesses and their regions and it is critical that we canvass Members' views through these forums. The two-day meeting of Council in Toowoomba in March was an opportunity for our Members to see first-hand the issues affecting food and fibre production on the Darling Downs.

I acknowledge the access we are afforded to the senior officials from the MDBA, the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, the Department of Environment and Energy, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH), the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) and officials from other agencies who make themselves available to engage on the issues critical to our sector.

I thank my fellow Directors and Council Members for their contribution in advocating for a better deal for irrigated agriculture, and for their participation during the development of our policy positions on key issues. I acknowledge the efforts of Members in raising the visibility of our issues at a national and local level and for being on hand to take up the lobbying effort to keep decision makers informed on our priorities. Our collective engagement and advocacy carries weight.

As NIC CEO Tom Chesson moves on to take up a new position, on behalf of Members I thank Tom for his dedication in overseeing the organisation embed its position as the leading voice for irrigated agriculture in Australia. Tom's tenure is marked by a number of significant achievements, including the legislating of the 1500 GL cap on water buybacks under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. I wish Tom great success in the future.



**Almonds, Riverland, SA**  
Copyright Central Irrigation Trust, SA

# Message from the CEO

As my tenure as chief executive of the National Irrigators' Council draws to a close, and reflecting on my four years, I believe the organisation has continued to make its mark, ensuring our collective voice is heard, and particularly through some challenging times around the implementation of the Basin Plan and the energy debate in Australia.



**Tom Chesson**  
CEO National Irrigators' Council

This past year was one of contrasts, with drought in many regions starting to become protracted where allocations across the board were looking decidedly miserable. The wet 2016 Winter/Spring saw records broken across many districts and the outlook for water allocations did a complete 180 degree turn. The dry conditions did serve to highlight the impact successive 'historic' reforms have had on the consumptive pool and the price for temporary water was a major talking point throughout the year with much speculation about what the new 'norm' is.

On the political front, the longest federal election in history resulted in the Government being returned with the Senate proving to be more fractious than it was previously. The key to getting anything done for our sector, our communities and our environment will continue to be ensuring bipartisan support to enable sensible reforms to be implemented.

The year has seen some momentous shifts in thinking by a number of key agencies, although it is fair to conclude they are yet to actually embrace and deliver the new concepts. These 'shifts' in thinking appear to be occurring more frequently as the reality of implementing what was some very coarse modelling underpinning the Basin Plan into reality, hits home.

The first of those seismic shifts was confirmed at the April Basin Ministers meeting where the Ministers agreed to look at incorporating 'complementary measures' in the Basin Plan. NIC has long argued that 'just adding water' wasn't the only answer and other measures would need to be undertaken if the environmental outcomes sought were to be delivered and maximised. The MDBA's Northern Basin Review recommendations also acknowledged the importance of 'complementary measures' in delivering environmental outcomes.

A further major shift was the acknowledgement by the MDBA during the Northern Basin Review process that removing vast quantities of water from productive use - has had, will have and is having -severe and lasting social and economic impacts on irrigation communities. There is a need for this work to be replicated in the Southern Basin. In the absence of the Federal Government and the MDBA doing this vital work at a community scale, the New South Wales and Victorian Governments have commissioned work in this space. It will be critical however, that the first five yearly assessment of the social and economic impacts of the Basin Plan to be undertaken by the MBDA is not a whitewash, tick a box endeavour. To this end, the Council has written to the MDBA asking that they not attempt to re-invent the social and economic wheel and actively use methodologies and the data already collected by the State Governments and other local and Federal government entities.

We are closely monitoring the process under the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) Adjustment Mechanism to achieve the targeted 650 GL. The issue around securing an additional 450 GL of up-water remains problematic. The Constraints Management Strategy (CMS) is designed to identify and describe the physical, operational and management constraints affecting environmental water delivery and to unlock constraints to allow the 450 GL of projected 'up-water' (over and above the 2750 GL of water for the environment to be recovered in the MDB Plan) to be delivered for environmental objectives. The floods in late 2016 highlight the need for the MDBA to go back to the drawing board to re-examine the claim that 80,000 ML/d can be delivered to the South Australian border without any third-party impacts.

## The energy debate

Energy accessibility and affordability continues to dominate much of NIC's advocacy, and through our Energy sub-committee and through the efforts of the Agriculture Industries Electricity Taskforce, we have worked to bring the interests of our members battling unsustainably high electricity costs, to the attention of the Australian Government.

NIC acknowledges the work of the AER through the draft pricing determinations where price reductions were achieved in 2015 in Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. However, due to the electricity networks vigorously challenging the AER determinations, supported by their unlimited capacity to do so, combined with the constraints within the Australian Energy Markets Commission (AEMC) rules that govern the regulatory process, our sector stakeholders find themselves returning to the status quo, with unsustainably high electricity costs.

The current appeals process leaves consumers at a disadvantage, where they face significant complexity and cost of appeals, as well as a lack of technical knowledge and financial resources to engage at the same level of capacity as network and generator owners. Our experience is that service providers are able to persuade the AER through a legalistic and adversarial process.

Reform is needed in Australia's NEM where a cultural shift is needed away from the entrenched relationship between the regulators and the networks, with greater opportunity for businesses and consumers to fully participate in appeals and review processes. The market lacks genuine competition and appears dominated by maximising returns to generators and infrastructure owners. The absence of competition results in gaming on the spot market which is struggling to cope with the transition to renewables. Consumers should not be forced onto the spot market due to an inability to secure quotes from retailers for fixed term contracts.

The state-wide blackout in South Australia and the state's over reliance on renewables, which cannot provide baseload power at key times, has focused state and federal governments' attention on previous failures to develop a transition plan through the COAG process, whilst providing electricity at a cost which is affordable and which allows food and fibre producers to compete domestically and internationally.

As part of our advocacy task we seek: a 30% reduction in the regulated electricity prices based on the 2014-15 financial year; a medium to long term price averaging 8 cents per kilowatt-hour for the electrons and 8 cents per kilowatt-hour for the network; a rule change via the Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC) to change the way electricity networks' regulated asset base (RAB) is calculated, and a national food and fibre tariff model.

## Finally

The period 2017/18 will be a 'milestone' year for the irrigation sector with key issues around the Murray Darling Basin Plan to be resolved including the Northern Basin Review and the SDL Adjustment Mechanism. It will also be an important year with the Queensland election providing barometer of how serious governments will be in addressing for the provision of affordable energy.

Finally, I thank my NIC Chair Gavin McMahon, Directors, Chairs of our sub-committees and especially my colleague Joy Thomas for a collective effort that has ensured that we were positioned to respond always in real time to issues as they arose, and to be on the front foot with policy statements in anticipation of key Basin Plan milestone issues.

I very much value the friendships I have formed through the NIC. As I embark on a new phase of my career in working to reduce carp numbers across the Murray Darling Basin, perhaps it is apt that Carpe Diem should become my new rallying cry!



Dairy cattle, Blighty, NSW  
Copyright Murray Irrigation Ltd

# Our Advocacy in 2015-16

National Irrigators' Council (NIC) advocacy remains on the sustainability of irrigated agriculture in Australia, and irrigation dependent communities. We have continued to argue the case for a balance between social, economic and environmental outcomes to ensure the Murray Darling Basin Plan is fair and workable. This is critical to ensure communities do not bear the cost of an unsatisfactory Basin Plan.

Reforms under the Basin Plan should not solely focus on water as the only environmental management solution for a complex structure of environmental challenges in the Basin. The Plan must be balanced; it must consider the needs of people, communities and food and fibre production in parallel with the environment. Objectives must be maximised through the building and/or upgrading of existing, environmental supply and efficiency measures, with a focus on projects under the localism model. In keeping with NIC principles, and as promised during the development of the Plan, any rule and operating changes must see the characteristics and reliability of water entitlements maintained, with no third-party impacts, unless otherwise agreed by all stakeholders.

NIC's policy and advocacy focus is guided by the organisation's very clear strategic direction, key principles, position statements and agreed priorities. NIC's presence in Canberra supports our capacity to influence with direct access to decision makers. Our effectiveness is underpinned by the knowledge and experience of our Members' and their contribution on all levels of policy.

## National leadership

The inter-connected issues within the Basin Plan implementation remain very real. These include progress on the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) Adjustment Mechanism to achieve up to 650 gigalitres (GL), progress on the review of the Northern Basin and NIC's Northern Basin group's efforts to achieve a sensible outcome and the unreal expectations regarding the proposed Constraints Management Strategy designed to free up an additional 450 GL of up-water.

We maintain the view that until the target of 2750 GL is achieved, with a full account by Government that it has been directed for the purposes for which it was intended, it will be premature to recover the proposed further 450 GL up-water. The latter is contingent on socio-economic neutrality in its effect where the socio-economic test is 'maintaining or improving social and economic outcomes'.

NIC commends the Government for securing the 1500 GL cap on water buybacks in the Murray Darling Basin, for its commitment to irrigated agriculture and understanding of the benefits of water left in production. Bipartisan support from the Labor Opposition and Labor Basin states was also critical in achieving this measure.

We have focused significant effort on advocating for a reduction in red tape, to remove the business and operating constraints on irrigated agriculture. Legislated changes to the Water Act in 2016 reflect improvements by streamlining the operation of the Water Act. The amendments gave effect to the recommendations of the Expert Panel as part of the 2014 review of the Water Act. The Government supported in full, or in part, all 23 recommendations of the Expert Panel. The improvements enable better delivery of economic, social and environmental outcomes of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

The commitments within the report of the Interagency Working Group, led by the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM), titled *Providing Water Information to the Commonwealth*, as part of the Water Act review, are welcomed and we will work to ensure a reduction in the frequency of reporting to lead water agencies, and the duplication of requests. NIC Members provided significant input and feedback to the working group and we will remain vigilant to ensure that these measures are implemented in full.

Decisions by the Murray Darling Basin Commonwealth and State Ministers (MINCO) during the year for a second notification for supply measure projects to occur at 30 June 2017, under the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) Adjustment Mechanism and the agreement by the Ministers to have non-flow, or complementary measures, considered as part of the SDL Adjustment Mechanism all represented a practical outcome.

The \$15 million commitment by the Government to a National Carp Control Plan and the proposed release of a carp herpes virus, will enable the necessary work to be completed in advance of the release of the virus, to reduce the level of carp from Australia's waterways and provide greater opportunity for native species to thrive.

NIC will continue to put the case for other complementary measures such as the improvement of fish migration through fishways along the Barwon-Darling, restoration of native fish habitat and feral animal control.

As part of the Northern Basin review, our Northern Basin members agree there should be no further high impact 'acquisition' of surface water entitlement across the Northern Basin by the Australian Government to meet the water recovery targets set by the Basin Plan. Instead, we seek a genuine examination of complementary measures that can deliver environmental gains, while minimising social and economic pain. We await the outcome of the Northern Basin review, however it is clear that the impact on Northern Basin communities from water buybacks is very real when MDBA research shows full-time agriculture job losses of up to 35% are to be anticipated in some communities.

## Water efficiency

Water is the lifeblood of many rural communities; it enables the irrigated agriculture sector to produce food and fibre for domestic consumption and significant export income for Australia. Irrigated agriculture provides direct employment on farms in broadacre and horticulture industries and brings prosperity into communities, enabling them to be self-sustaining, with processing industries and significant local and regional flow on effects.

As at 30 September 2016, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority estimates that contracted water recovery in the Basin is 1996 gegalitres (GL) or 72% of the way toward meeting the 2750 GL surface water recovery target outlined in the Basin Plan.

When the Basin Plan was conceived, as part of the Water Act 2007, Basin communities in good faith, understood the principle that some water would be returned to the environment for the broader benefit, and to ensure sustainable extraction into the future. The process of water recovery however, commenced prematurely in 2009, before the finalisation of the Basin Plan and the full understanding of the impacts of the valley based sustainable diversion limits and the environmental flow targets.

The objectives of the Basin Plan are to give effect to relevant international agreements through the integrated management of Basin water resources, and to establish a sustainable and long-term adaptive management framework for the Basin's water resources, taking into account the broader management of natural resources of the Murray-Darling Basin. Other key objectives are to optimise social, economic and environmental outcomes arising from the use of Basin water resources in the national interest, and to improve water security for all uses of Basin water resources.

Irrigators have long supported healthy working rivers and river systems; it is in their interests to do so and the long-term interests of the communities in which they reside. NIC has continued to advocate for a redirection of focus away from the principle of 'just add water' as the solution to a dynamic, complex and highly regulated river system and environmental structure. We have advocated for a suite of non-flow or complementary measures as a way of better achieving environmental outcomes.

These measures might include:

- Control of invasive pest species, for example, carp eradication through the release of the Carp Herpes virus, as well as feral pig, fox and feral cat management.
- Native fish habitat restoration and fish passage works.
- Riparian zone management and wetland protection.
- Strategic purchase of land with high value environmental properties.
- Cold water pollution management.

Efficiency measures such as investment in upgrading and modernising irrigation systems, are supporting some of the most efficient systems in the world. This is a way of providing short and long terms benefits for communities. Short term stimulus occurs through the construction phase of projects. Infrastructure projects enable water savings, which are shared and result in water being retained on farm, contributing to direct employment in irrigated agriculture and associated flow-on opportunities in downstream processing industries. These opportunities provide employment and create much needed social and economic benefit for many Basin communities.

Irrigation supports the capacity of farmers to diversify and enhance their agricultural and horticultural opportunities. Australian irrigators have undertaken substantial efficiency improvements, both government and self-funded. They have embraced research and development, taken advantage of technological change and broadened their knowledge to improve their bottom line, while at the same time increasing their water use efficiency. The sector is now viewed as a 'world's best practice' model producing more food and fibre, more efficiently.

Social and economic analysis must be embedded in all decision-making processes at the front end.



Lateral irrigator watering canola on a property, Conargo, NSW  
Copyright, Murray Irrigation Ltd

## Energy

Our dedicated campaign continues, in bringing to the attention of decision makers the unsustainable cost of electricity on the irrigated agriculture sector. Relationships were forged with peak agricultural organisations to advocate to governments on this critical issue.

Electricity network charges continue to have a highly distorting effect on the electricity market. Network price increases have been far in excess of the consumer price index (CPI), typically representing around 50% of farmers' electricity bills; the actual electricity charges make up less than 26%. An international comparison of Australia's key agricultural trading partners conducted in 2012 showed that Australia's average electricity prices had grown by 40% since 2007. Cost increases for Australian irrigated agriculture have been in excess of 100% for most, and in some cases as high as 300%, over the same period.

Financial pressures caused by high electricity prices have impacted on the capacity of farmers to move to new pressurised water efficient systems. The 'water efficiency versus energy efficiency' conundrum has also impeded farmers' ability to make new water efficient systems profitable.

Directed by the work of the Energy sub-committee, NIC seeks:

- A 30% reduction in the regulated electricity prices based on the 2014-15 financial year.
- A medium to long term price averaging 8 cents per kilowatt-hour for the electrons and 8 cents per kilowatt-hour for the network.
- A rule change via the Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC) to change the way electricity networks' regulated asset base (RAB) is calculated.
- A national food and fibre tariff model.
- A water energy productivity program designed to fund and accelerate the adoption of energy solutions
- Fundamental reform of the National Electricity Market (NEM) to address the lack of genuine competition, the operation of the bidding process and a market where consumers' interests are fairly represented.
- Stability and certainty in national energy policy to allow investment.

NIC played a key role in establishing the Agriculture Industries Energy Taskforce in September 2014, as part of a sector-led campaign against high electricity prices. We argued the case to the federal government, the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) and other key energy bodies, highlighting the impact of electricity costs on our sector. Through the AER pricing determinations process, we specifically pursued the justification for unreasonably high network charges imposed by networks.

We have called for greater scrutiny of network companies' proposals submitted to the AER and closer examination of the data presented, including:

- the weighted average cost of capital (WACC) submitted in network companies' proposals
- the calculation of the cost of a company's debt – debt and equity raising costs, and
- income tax, (*where we pushed for greater scrutiny on the taxation allowances for privately owned distributors*)

There is urgent need for reform in Australia's national energy market (NEM) with a particular focus on the regulatory oversight framework. Australian consumers are paying around twice as much for network charges as those in the United Kingdom and around 2.5 times as much as those in the United States. A comprehensive assessment of the economy-wide costs and benefits of revising the electricity network and transmission businesses' RABs to efficient levels is long overdue. A cultural shift is needed away from the entrenched relationship between the regulators and the networks, with greater opportunity for business and consumers to fully participate in appeals and review processes.

NIC has been exposed to the entrenched culture of institutional and blame shifting with governance and regulation of the industry split between many bodies, where prescriptive rules and processes prevent positive change. The complexity in existing arrangements results in extreme cynicism and frustration by those who attempt to engage in the NEM. The myriad of regulation appears out of touch and unaccountable, built on abstract theoretical ideas that are beyond the reality of the industry and its consumers.



**Power lines, Murrumbidgee Valley, NSW**  
*Copyright National Irrigators' Council*

While the institutions, governments and industry claim they have the long-term interests of consumers at heart, this is not visible in practice. The evidence of industry profit and prices supports the observations of many, that shareholders are benefiting at the expense of electricity consumers. It appears that the owners of the electricity generation, distribution and transmission assets have a dominant voice in driving the policies adopted by the regulatory bodies.

The major objective of the NEM must be to provide affordable, reliable power in the best interest of consumers. Under current market governance arrangements, existing loopholes are enabling price gouging by network businesses and preventing a fair and effective pricing structure for consumers.

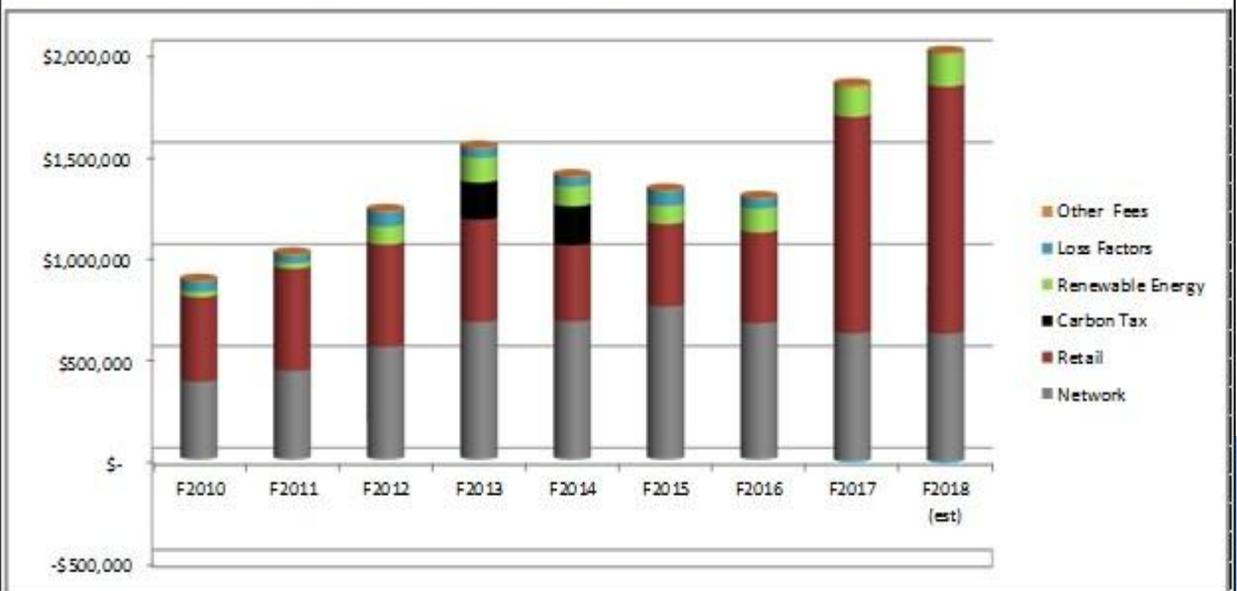
The closure of coal fired power is causing significant impacts on the electricity industry, with gas increasingly on the agenda as a transition fuel to a lower carbon economy. Yet at the same time there are moratoriums in Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory on unconventional gas exploration and ongoing expansion of LNG export. Improved planning and coordination between the Commonwealth and the states in this space is critical to ensure energy affordability and reliability as the generation mix continues to change into the future.

We continue to work with the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) to ensure irrigated agriculture is a focus for projects for investment in renewable energy and low emissions technology. NIC has participated in Government related inquiries and the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) pricing determinations, in numerous workshops and consultative groups, the Electricity Transformation Roadmap forums and the Consumer Challenge Panel, and appeared before the Australian Competition Tribunal consultations and provided input through initiatives driven by Energy Consumers Australia (ECA).



### LOXTON PUMPING STATION ELECTRICITY COSTS F2010 to F2018

Annual Expense	F2010	F2011	F2012	F2013	F2014	F2015	F2016	F2017	F2018 (est)
Network	\$ 381,979	\$ 434,367	\$ 552,685	\$ 674,919	\$ 677,241	\$ 750,623	\$ 1,000,662	\$ 1,029,623	\$ 1,020,000
Retail	\$ 414,584	\$ 502,594	\$ 502,594	\$ 502,594	\$ 374,511	\$ 405,121	\$ 496,488	\$ 506,098	\$ 500,000
Carbon Tax	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 181,228	\$ 190,333	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Renewable Energy	\$ 27,264	\$ 26,236	\$ 88,470	\$ 120,745	\$ 97,706	\$ 88,775	\$ 202,689	\$ 283,000	\$ 248,857
Loss Factors	\$ 47,499	\$ 38,182	\$ 69,398	\$ 44,320	\$ 44,088	\$ 69,502	\$ 46,006	\$ 33,888	\$ 34,000
Other Fees	\$ 8,835	\$ 8,249	\$ 9,647	\$ 9,678	\$ 8,784	\$ 9,325	\$ 8,058	\$ 7,487	\$ 7,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 880,160</b>	<b>\$ 1,009,627</b>	<b>\$ 1,222,793</b>	<b>\$ 1,533,483</b>	<b>\$ 1,392,662</b>	<b>\$ 1,323,346</b>	<b>\$ 1,754,903</b>	<b>\$ 1,859,298</b>	<b>\$ 1,809,857</b>



### PRICING INCREASES F2010-F2018



N.B. based on 3,628,523 kwh Peak and 5,126,456 kwh Off Peak usage and 4,545 Kvar Demand each year

Table 1: Reflecting price increases at Loxton Pumping station, Riverland region, South Australia

# NIC Sub-Committees

NIC sub-committees play a central role in driving the Council's policy focus, with expertise on key policy areas. The sub-committees are pivotal in the development of NIC's position statements, policy documents and submissions to Government and Government related inquiries.

**Groundwater sub-committee:** The committee was established in 2009 to provide input on groundwater policy and management, particularly in relation to the Basin Plan. Working in partnership with industry organisations, the committee was instrumental in successfully challenging the proposed reductions in groundwater sustainable diversion limits in the Guide to the Basin Plan.

The committee continues its focus on the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) groundwater trading rules and provided input into the national Groundwater Strategic Framework which aims to prioritise the assessment of groundwater resources as part of effective management of these resources. The committee has also directed its attention to the MDBA groundwater trading rules and the proposed changes to the water trigger in the EPBC Act which would allow the responsibility for assessing the impacts of large scale coal mining and coal seam gas developments on water resources to shift from the Commonwealth to the states.

**Energy sub-committee:** The committee has driven a strong advocacy campaign to bring to the attention of governments, the impact of the unsustainable cost of electricity on irrigated agriculture. The impact of energy policy failure in Australia is undermining the viability of our highly productive and efficient agricultural sector which produces food and fibre for domestic and export markets, and destroying our capacity to be a competitive global food producer to put fresh food on the tables of Australian households.

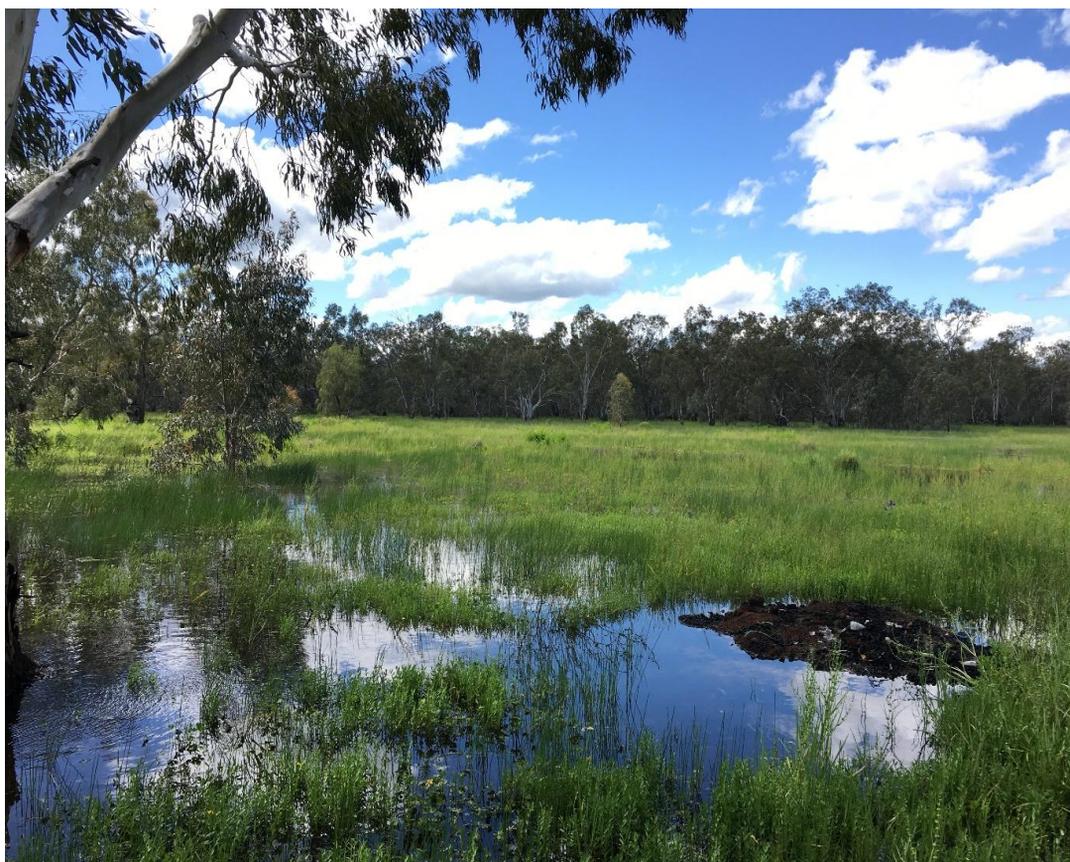
The committee has called for urgent reform of Australia's national energy market (NEM) to address the lack of genuine competition in the market, and has sought a cultural shift away from the entrenched relationship between the regulators and the networks, with greater opportunity for businesses and consumers to fully participate in appeals and review processes.

The committee developed a series of recommendations to Government which included seeking a 30% reduction in regulated electricity prices based on the 2014-15 financial year and a medium to long term price averaging 8 cents per kilowatt-hour for electrons.

**Irrigation infrastructure sub-committee:** The committee provided significant input into the 2015 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) review of Water Charge (Infrastructure Rules) 2010, Water Charge (Termination Fee) Rules 2009 and the Water Charge (Planning and Management Information) Rules 2010. The ACCC review is designed to reduce the administrative burden on business without removing or altering the principles for the rules. The committee remains vigilant to ensure that the ACCC Final Advice to Government addresses the opportunities to reduce red tape raised by our members.

A further key focus of the committee is the Government's National Register for Foreign Ownership of Water Access Entitlements. The committee highlighted that the onus must be placed on the owner of the asset and the cost of ensuring compliance with the register, with the Commonwealth. In addition, there should be no additional regulatory burden on irrigation businesses and specifically, irrigation delivery schemes who are already captured by significant regulatory obligations. The foreign ownership regulations are due to come into force on 1 July 2017.

The committee has worked with the Bureau of Meteorology as part of an Interagency Working Group, established in 2015, to provide advice and feedback on data collection and whether it remains relevant, and to mitigate duplication and to streamline reporting requirements sought by many government agencies. NIC continues to monitor outcomes from this initiative.



Lagoon, Goondiwindi region, Queensland  
Copyright Tim Napier

## Working with stakeholders

Meetings between NIC leadership and the Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources and the Minister for the Environment and Energy are a critical part of our advocacy and building relationships. Engaging federal Ministers, Senators and Members across all parties keeps parliamentary representatives briefed on the issues of importance to our members.

Three face to face meetings of the Council during the year provide a forum for NIC members to work through solutions to the most pressing issues identified, that are relevant to members both inside and outside the Basin. NIC's sub-committee structure and ad hoc reference groups provide the appropriate mechanism for policy development both during Council meetings and outside scheduled face to face meetings.

Council meetings enable members to meet with senior officials from the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, the Department of the Environment and Energy, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH), the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and the Bureau of Meteorology and other stakeholders.

NIC has progressed its campaign, in collaboration with other peak industry bodies, to achieve a fairer electricity pricing system in Australia and to ensure that network supplied electricity remains a cost-effective energy source for food and fibre producers.

The Agriculture Industries Energy Taskforce\*, established in 2014, worked throughout 2015 and 2016 to identify the task necessary to advocate on the challenges faced by the sector. These included:

- participation in the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) pricing determinations process in Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia
- working with the Alliance to Save Energy 2xEP campaign to develop and advocate cross sectoral solutions
- work with the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) to identify renewable energy technologies
- taking advantage of Energy Consumers Australia (ECA) grants program to build capacity to progress various initiatives, and
- identifying opportunities for the sector through the Clean Energy Regulator and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation.

Collaboration with the Minerals Council and other peak agricultural organisations supported the development of a publication in 2015 titled: *Powering Regional Australia – The case for Fuel Tax Credits* highlights the case for the retention of fuel tax credits and the importance to agricultural industries in removing or reducing the incidence of fuel tax from business inputs.

Industry	Value		Industry	Value
Construction	\$124 bn		Mining	\$109 bn
Tourism	\$43 bn		Oil and gas	\$35 bn
Agriculture	\$33 bn		Forest and wood products	\$20 bn
Maritime	\$9 bn		Fishing	\$2 bn

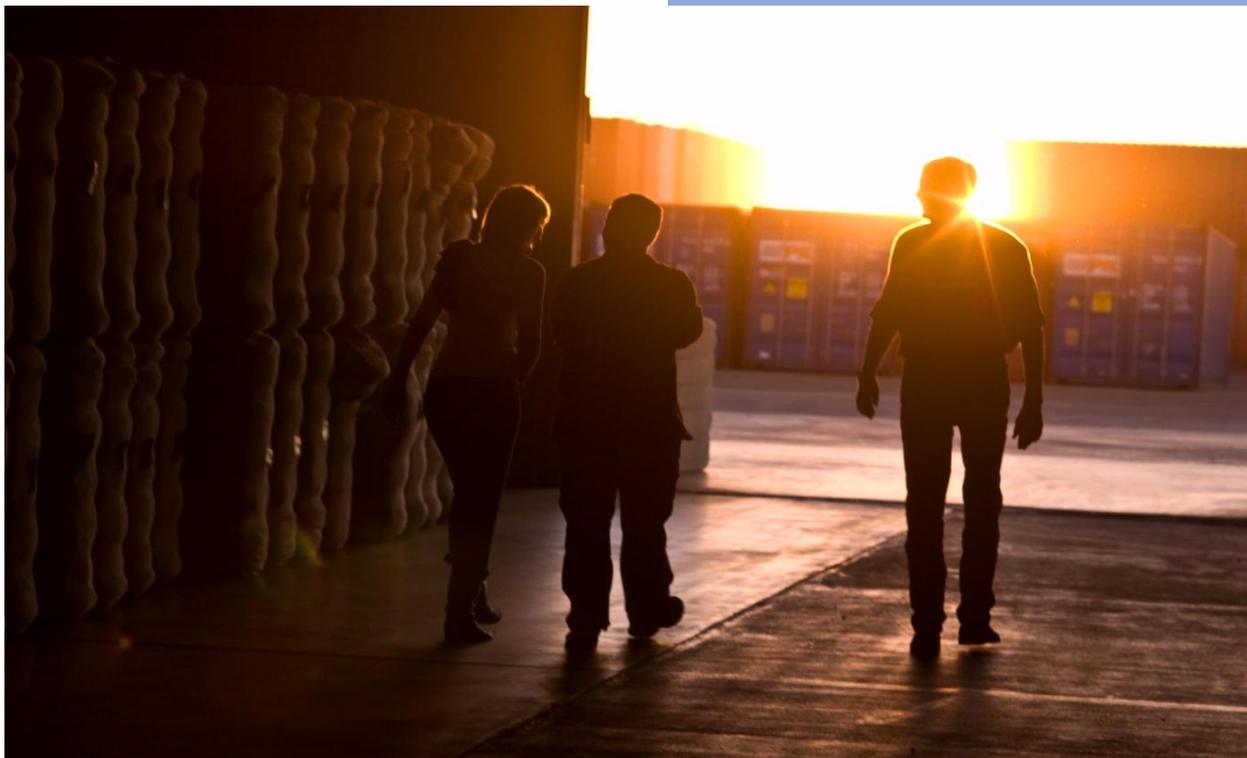
**Table 2: Major Australian industries that rely on off-road diesel**

The NIC will work to identify further opportunities to partner with irrigated agriculture organisations across Australia and build alliances, draw on local knowledge and expertise to ensure the voice of the irrigated food and fibre sector is heard.

\*Taskforce members: National Irrigators' Council; NSW Farmers Association; National Farmers' Federation; Cotton Australia; NSW Irrigators' Council; CANEGROWERS; Queensland Farmers Federation, Central Irrigation Trust (SA), Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group (BRIG)



**Canola crop, Conargo, Southern New South Wales**  
*Copyright Murray Irrigation Ltd*



**Inspecting the baled cotton, Auscott, Nevertire, NSW**  
*Copyright National Irrigators' Council*

## Input into policy

Government and related inquiries provide a platform for NIC to advocate on behalf of members on issues of importance to the sector and provide submissions to:

- Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee on the Water Amendment Bill 2015 regarding the 1500 GL limit on surface water purchases in the Murray-Darling Basin
- Senate Select Committee on the Murray Darling Basin Plan
- Department of Agriculture and Water Resources regarding the Commonwealth On-Farm Further Irrigation Efficiency (COFFIE) Program
- Department of Industry and Science review of Governance Arrangements for Australian Energy Markets
- Productivity Commission review of Regulation of Australian Agriculture
- Australian Government's proposal to establish a national register of foreign ownership of water access entitlements
- Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Review of Water Charge Rules: Draft Advice
- COAG Energy Council's review of the Limited Merits Review Regime (LMR).
- The Treasury regarding the National Register of foreign ownership of water access entitlements (March and September 2016)
- COAG Energy Council re the Review of the Limited Merits Review Regime

Following the 2015 federal election, NIC acted promptly to engage the incoming Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources and the Minister for the Environment and Energy on the issues most critical for the irrigated agriculture sector in Australia to remain a productive, profitable and dynamic sector, providing jobs and sustaining rural communities.



**Harvesting sugar cane, Mackay, Queensland**  
*Copyright Pioneer Valley Water, Mackay, Qld*

## History of Irrigation

Regulation of the Murray River system was one of the first issues addressed following Federation. A period of drought beginning in 1895 culminated in the 'Federation drought' of 1901–02. A conference held in Corowa in 1902, called for government action to manage the waters of the Murray River. Significant negotiation followed, during which the states claimed property rights over the waters of the Murray and its tributaries.

Negotiations were finally concluded in 1915. The River Murray Waters Agreement, to which the Commonwealth and the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia were parties, set out the basic conditions which remain in force today:

- flow at Albury is shared equally between New South Wales and Victoria
- Victoria and New South Wales retain control of their tributaries below Albury
- Victoria and New South Wales supply South Australia with a guaranteed minimum quantity of water or "entitlement".

The agreement also provided for construction of dams, weirs and locks on the main stream of the Murray to be managed by the River Murray Commission, which was established in 1917. At that time, the River Murray Waters Agreement was limited to the management of water for irrigation and navigation.

### The Murray–Darling Basin Agreement

It became apparent that there was a need for a coordinated approach to management of the Basin as a whole. Following negotiations beginning in 1985 the Murray–Darling Basin Agreement was signed in 1987. In its initial form, it was as an amendment to the River Murray Waters Agreement. In 1992, a new Murray–Darling Basin Agreement was signed, replacing the River Murray Waters Agreement. The Agreement was given full legal status by the Murray–Darling Basin Act 1993 which was passed by all the contracting governments. Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory later joined the agreement.

The purpose of the Murray–Darling Basin Agreement was 'to promote and coordinate effective planning and management for the equitable, efficient and sustainable use of the water, land and other environmental resources of the Murray–Darling Basin'. The Agreement established new institutions at the political, bureaucratic and community levels. These were:

- the Murray–Darling Basin Ministerial Council (MDBMC);
- the Murray–Darling Basin Commission (MDBC); and
- the Community Advisory Committee (CAC).

### The National Water Initiative

The lack of satisfactory progress under the Murray–Darling Basin Agreement and recognition of water challenges elsewhere in Australia, led to the adoption of the National Water Initiative in 2004. Key elements of the Initiative included promotion of water trading and a commitment to restore at least 500 gigalitres of environmental flows to the Murray Darling Basin

The Commonwealth Water Act 2007 commenced in March 2008 and was amended by the Water Amendment Act 2008 in December 2008 following the March 2008 Memorandum of Understanding on Murray Darling Basin Reform and the July 2008 Intergovernmental Agreement on Murray Darling Basin Reform.

The Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) was established under the federal Water Act 2007 as an independent, expertise based statutory agency. The MDBA is the body responsible for overseeing water resource planning in the Murray-Darling Basin. The Water Act also established the Commonwealth Water Holder (CEWH) to manage the Commonwealth's environmental water.

## Irrigation facts

The total Gross Value of irrigated agricultural production (GVIAP) in Australia in 2014-15 was over \$15 billion, rising by 3%, or \$509 million on the previous year. The total Gross Value of Agricultural Production (GVAP) was \$53.6 billion, an increase of 5 percent from the previous year. *{Australian Bureau of Statistics}*

The three commodities with the highest GVIAP were:

- fruit and nuts (excluding grapes) at \$2.88 billion
- dairy products at \$2.83 billion; and
- vegetables at \$2.68 billion.

Combined, these three commodity groups accounted for 56 percent of total GVIAP for the 2014-15 year.

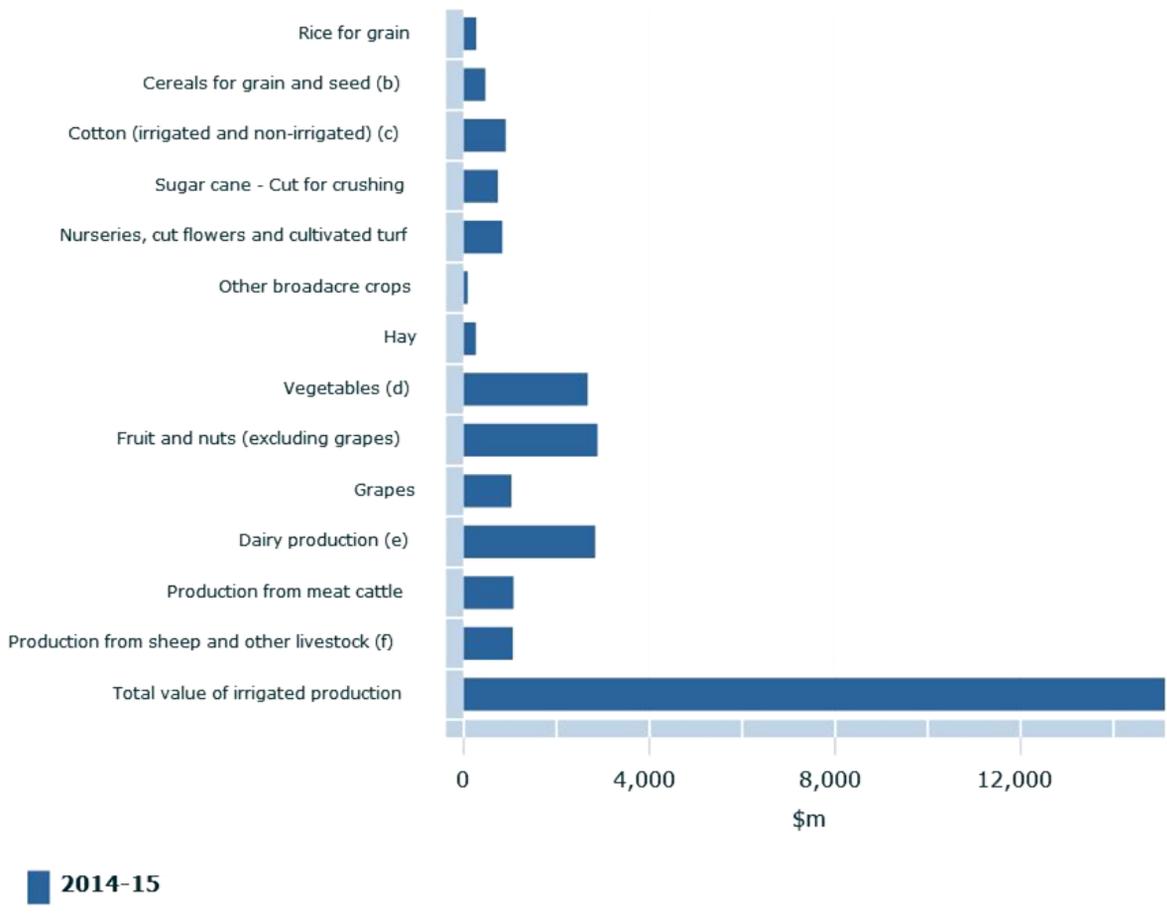
Irrigated agriculture plays a vital role in producing the food and fibre consumed by all Australians, as well as providing jobs and export income for the nation. It contributes to the living standards of every Australian, regardless of where they live, and in particular, supports the social and economic wellbeing of irrigated agriculture dependent communities, producing flow on effects in jobs and downstream processing industries, with goods such as milk, fruit, vegetables, rice, grains, sugar, nuts, meat and other commodities like cotton.

Increases in the number of businesses irrigating their pastures for grazing during 2014-15, combined with strong demand for livestock products driving their prices higher resulted in large increases in GVIAP for the livestock commodities. GVIAP for production from meat cattle and from sheep and other livestock both reported increases of nearly 50%, with the value of irrigated production now sitting at \$1.1 billion for each commodity.



**Macquarie Marshes, NSW**  
*Copyright Macquarie River Food and Fibre*

### Gross Value of Irrigated Agricultural Production, 2014-15(a)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

The GVIAP of most commodity groups increased with the most notable exception being cotton, where reduced water availability and unfavourable growing conditions saw the GVIAP decrease by 53 percent or \$1 billion down to a GVIAP of \$907 million.

Irrigated production in the Murray Darling Basin, over the same period, was valued at \$6.9 billion and other parts of Australia at \$8.1 billion.

Australian farmers continue to be innovators; they find solutions when faced with tough climatic conditions. Irrigators are no exception and over recent decades have overcome sometimes inefficient historical designs of irrigation districts to become more efficient.

Government investment in infrastructure projects are supported, where water savings retained on farm contribute to the direct employment in irrigated agriculture. Water left in production also enhances opportunities for the development of local industries, providing the social and economic underpinnings of irrigated agriculture communities.

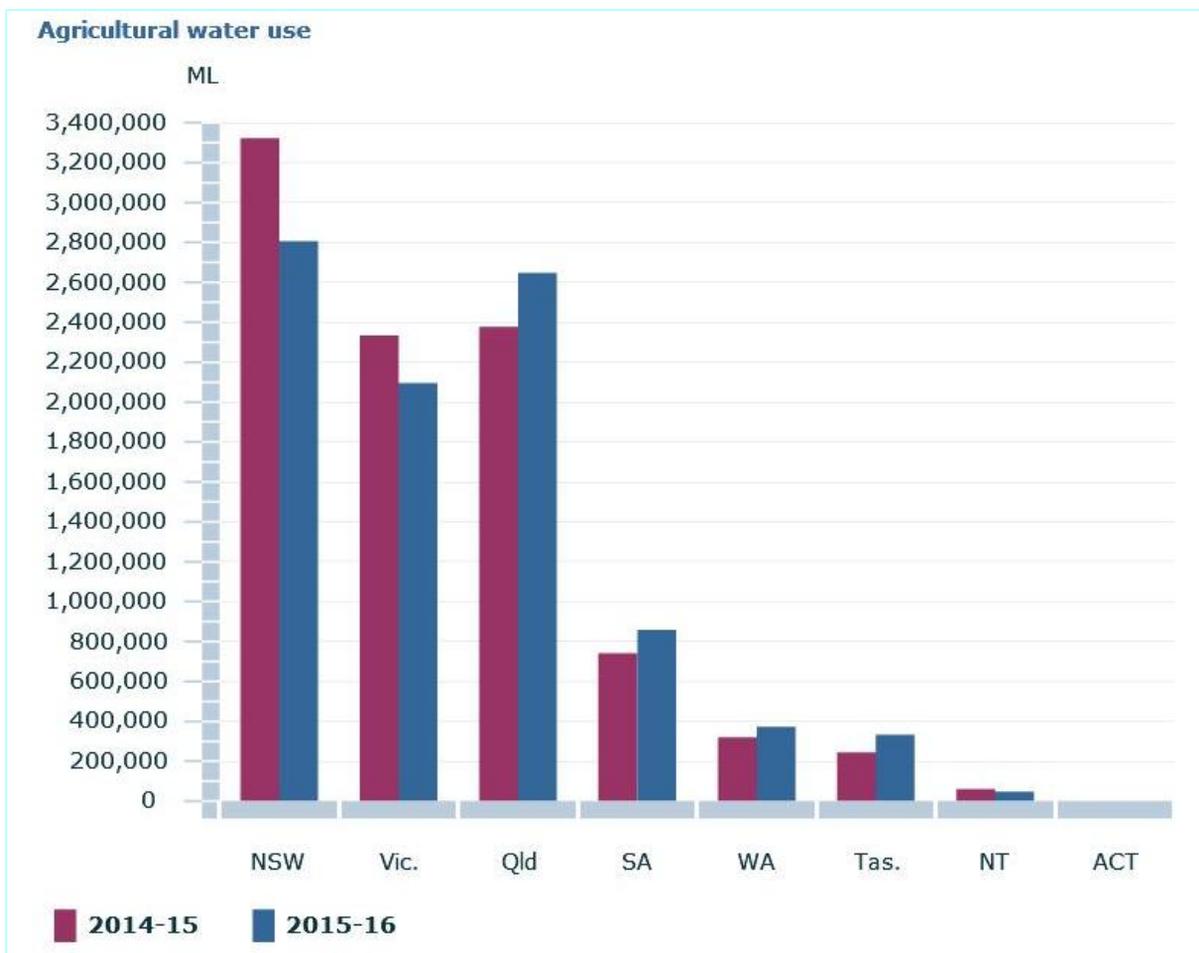
Water efficiency is enabling water left in production and contributing to greater productivity across industry and greater flow on benefits to irrigated agriculture dependent communities. NIC has consistently advocated a 'triple bottom line' approach, arguing that the strategy of just adding water was flawed, and that it would have major impacts on producers and communities and fail to produce desired environmental outcomes.

It would be a flawed approach to continue to attribute funds to water purchase without a genuine examination of the value of complementary measures as detailed in this report. NIC has long advocated for greater effort to be directed to this task, to consider the development of a suite of non-flow, or complementary, measures. This approach was also proposed by the Northern Basin Advisory Committee (NBAC) as part of the Northern Basin Review. Basin Ministers have called for officials to consider opportunities for a wider range of complementary projects, such as carp control, and other measures as detailed in this report, to provide 'triple bottom line' benefits under the Basin Plan.

Opportunities exist to continue a range of efficiency gains, for example, within the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) adjustment mechanism in the Murray Darling Basin, and in other areas consistent with the National Water Initiative (NWI) policy framework.

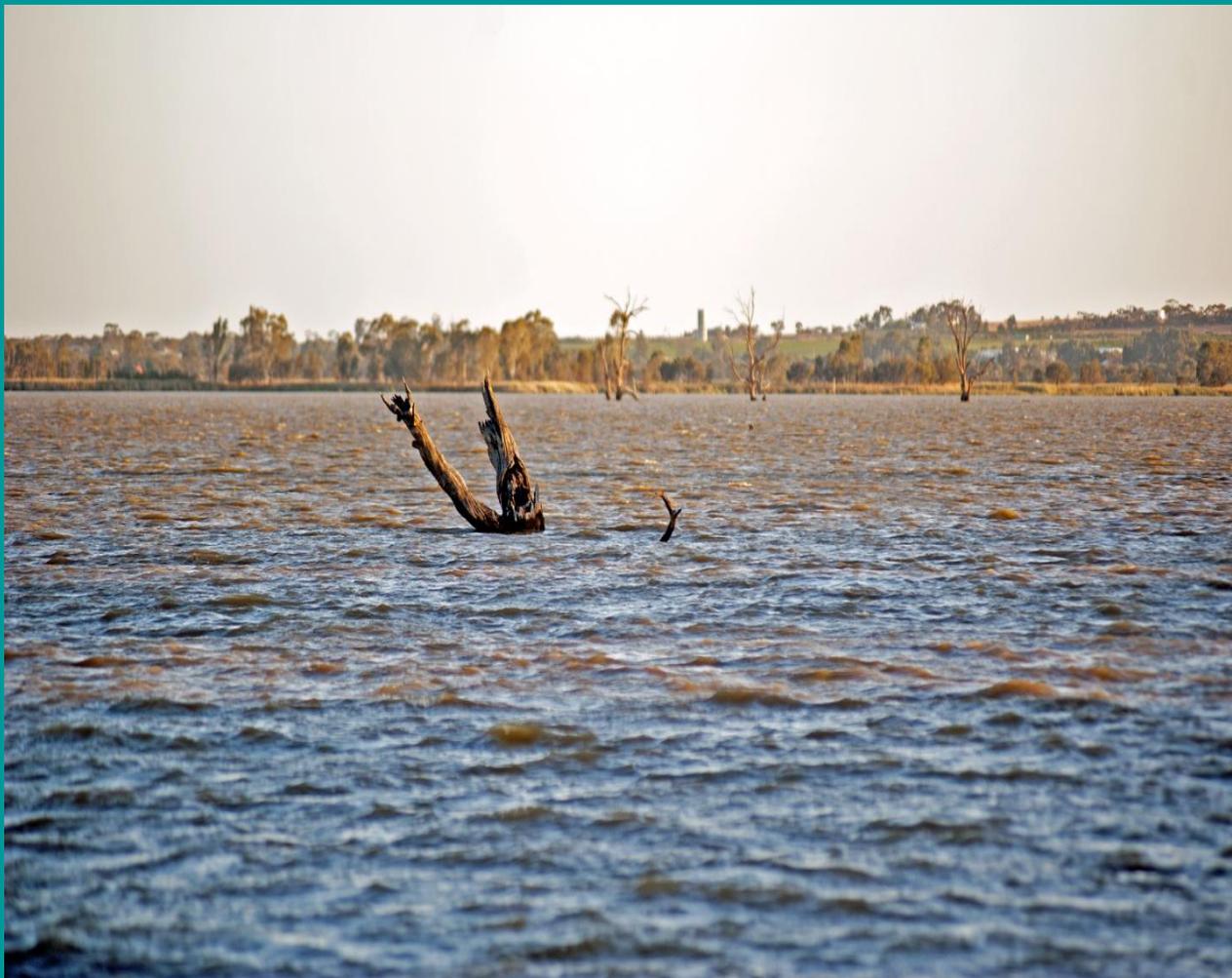
In keeping with the promise of 'localism' and 'adaptive management', local knowledge and input must be reflected and incorporated into Government decisions. Irrigators have long supported healthy working rivers and river systems; it is in their interests to do so and the interests of the irrigation dependent communities in which they reside. Our continued key objective is to challenge the theory of 'just add water' as the environmental solution to a complex structure of environmental challenges in the Basin. The Basin Plan must be balanced; it must consider the needs of people, communities and food and fibre production in parallel with the environment.

With the global demand for food and fibre steadily rising, Australia is well-positioned to respond to this demand.





**Loading sugar for export, Bundaberg, Queensland**  
*Copyright Bundaberg Regional Irrigators' Group, Qld*



## National Irrigators' Council

*Food and fibre for the nation*

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