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Coalition water policy – hits and misses

The National Irrigators' Council has welcomed the Coalition's commitment to fully assess the social and economic impacts of the proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan through a review by the Productivity Commission and ABARE.

The NIC said the commitment was consistent with the Council's pre-election policy platform and would ensure a thorough, independent understanding of the impacts on rural communities and food and fibre production could be achieved.

However the NIC gave the Coalition a big mark-down for its promise to enter the temporary water market to buy water for the Lower Lakes and Coorong.

NIC Chairman, Stewart Ellis, said the Coalition policy placed significant focus on the concerns of irrigators and communities in the Basin.

"We commend the Coalition for their strong recognition that we must have a Basin Plan that balances the needs of the environment with those of agriculture and food production. We have been seeking recognition of the role that irrigators play as food and fibre producers and the Coalition deserves praise for acknowledging that role.

"However the proposal to buy 150,000 megalitres on the temporary market in the coming water year would severely distort that market and push up water prices for food producers just as they are hopeful that recovery from the long drought is beginning. This is not a proposal that we can support."

Mr Ellis said the NIC also welcomed Coalition promises to:

- Commit to an additional \$300 million on-farm infrastructure program
- Provide \$500 million from existing funds to secure future water supplies, including considering smarter ways to deliver environmental outcomes
- Undertake a strategic buyback program in line with the Basin Plan and issue new guidelines for the buyback
- Fully purchase from willing sellers any gap remaining between current diversions and new SDLs after the completion of existing programs
- Reduce red-tape and reporting obligations for irrigators and irrigation corporations

However he said the NIC did not support the Government entering the temporary water market or the Coalition's proposed referendum for the further referral of powers from the states to the Commonwealth, even if as a last resort.

Mr Ellis challenged the ALP to also support an independent social and economic review of the draft Basin Plan through the Productivity Commission.

Media Contact: Stewart Ellis 0429 871 165