

Basin Ministers must focus on outcomes

Socio economic data from the Northern basin review should be seen as a gamechanger by Basin State Water Ministers, as they head into Friday's Murray Darling Basin Ministerial Council meeting in Mildura, says National Irrigators' Council (NIC) CEO, Steve Whan.

Steve Whan said "Ministers need to focus on outcomes for river health and the community rather than just ticking off numbers of gicalitres (GL). I'm hopeful that despite the sometimes-fractious debate they will do that.

"The socio-economic analysis undertaken by the MDBA as part of the Northern Basin review shows comprehensively, and scientifically, that removing productive water has a negative impact on jobs throughout a region. That scientific modelling shows that recovering 278GL in the Northern basin has cost 450 people their jobs.

"Future action needs to be firmly framed around that background - around achieving outcomes without negative community impact.

"NICs members come from every basin state and the view is consistent across each.

"Irrigators want to see a genuine triple bottom line outcome out of this process. We want healthy rivers and healthy environment; we want basin communities to have bright futures; and we want viable and sustainable irrigated agriculture that can put affordable fresh fruit and vegetables in Australian kitchens.

"That includes supplying the people of Adelaide with the fresh produce they enjoy from South Australia's irrigated areas.

"It should be acknowledged that irrigators and basin communities are, and continue to, contribute to achieving environmental targets. MDBA estimates water recovery as at 31 Dec 2016 as being 2,027.6 GL, or 73.7% toward the 2,750 GL surface water recovery target. ABS figures also show significant reductions in the total area being irrigated and the amount of water being used per hectare."

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Background on National Irrigators' Council key issues for Ministers:

- **SDL Offsets:** The plan allows up to 650GL of the 2,750GL target to be delivered through offset measures which would be beneficial for the health of the river system. State Governments have put forward projects which include things like environmental works to manage weir pools more naturally, better target environmental watering of flood plains or wetlands and better management of rivers or storages.

It is in the interests of the health of the river, basin communities and irrigators to see these implemented and fairly accounted for in the implementation of the basin plan.

- **Complementary Measures:** Ministers agreed at their last meeting to look further at the potential of complementary measures to contribute to outcomes, these measures must be pursued as part of the implementation. Complementary measures include, for example, measures to reduce cold water pollution. Cold water pollution occurs when water is released from the bottom of storages. When the water is too cold native fish cannot breed. Often that means a large release of cold water prevents native fish breeding but provides perfect conditions for Carp to spawn.
- **450GL Up Water:** The so called Up Water is additional 450GL included in the plan to bring the total up from 2,750GL to 3,200GL. When it was announced by then Prime Minister Gillard and then Minister Burke it was to be provided through efficiency measures and only if there was “no social and economic downside for communities.”

Since then the 450GL has become an almost iconic number for some people. NIC feels we need to focus on outcomes rather than just the number.

Recovery of 450GL of up-water from the productive pool of available water will push many more Basin communities over a ‘tipping point’– indeed the majority of irrigated cropping throughout the Basin will not survive in the face of the prices that will be demanded in allocation water markets in anything other than high rainfall years. NIC has heard from Irrigators in South Australia for example that if this provision results in removal of more water permanent horticulture could cease in their region during the next drought.

As has been evidenced by the MDBA’s Northern Basin review and the socio-economic impact analysis done in Victoria, the current neutrality test is a poor one because it does not comprehend collective impacts. The impact test must be broadened to go beyond individual property-based impact – only then can the commitment, made by Government that up-water will only be recovered in ways that are socially and economically neutral, be honoured.

- **Structural Adjustment:** The Northern Basin work has confirmed that the burden of removal of water is borne hardest by communities. This confirmation reinforces the need for well targeted structural adjustment funding in those communities that have been negatively impacted.
- **Northern Basin:** NIC contends that there should be no further recovery from the Northern Basin over the current 278GL achieved and strongly advocates complementary measures to achieve actual outcomes for the environment.