

Irrigators Respond to Lateline Accusations

ABC Lateline attempts to portray Murray Darling Basin environmental water programs as a failure are unjustified says National Irrigators Council CEO, Steve Whan.

The program made claims about the entire basin plan based on one single property and an allegation of an illegal structure.

Steve Whan said "What the program did not make clear was that the two parties are currently involved a civil dispute being heard by the Queensland Supreme Court.

"Regardless of the outcome of this particular case it is ridiculous to suggest that recent allegations put the whole basin plan in doubt.

"The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) currently holds 2,563,200ML of entitlement, 1,949,366ML of this (76%) is in the southern basin.

"There is no suggestion that this water is not going exactly where it was intended.

"Even in the area that is the subject of this story the CEWH figures show that they own 15,540 ML of Medium entitlement in Qld Border Rivers and 19,358 ML unsupplemented. The reporting shows that they have been using that water with Commonwealth environmental watering in the catchment rising from 1,000 ML in 2011-12 to 22,529 ML in 2016-17.

"Murray Darling basin irrigators work hard to produce our food and fibre, they take the risks to invest in crops knowing natural disaster or drought could destroy their livelihood and they have now spent years worrying about the basin plan, engaging honestly and seeking the certainty to keep producing the food we eat and the fibre we wear.

"They have no tolerance for people who don't follow the rules, but they are also offended by journalists who for the sake of a better headline seek to tarnish every one of them based on unproven allegations.

"The Basin Plan has been ten years in the making, and there has been serious tension between the benefits of increased environmental water, and the impact that the removal of water from irrigation will have on the economies of towns and the social health of people in our rural and regional communities.

"What we appear to have now is an ongoing campaign orchestrated by individuals and organisations who are ideologically opposed to irrigation and the benefits it brings to Australia.

“As an industry we are not concerned or afraid of the various inquiries that have been initiated, but we are concerned about the half-truths and in many cases patently false claims that are being made in the media.

“Lateline was factually wrong when it said that water could be extracted from overland flows or pumped from flood waters without being accounted for. An irrigator who has sold water harvesting water to another party including the Commonwealth must have their infrastructure audited to obtain an overland flow licence that is audited by the Queensland Government each year.

“Lateline questioned how a farmer can sell water to the Commonwealth and still expand irrigated production. The reason is the water market (introduced by national bipartisan agreement). The overall pool of water has been reduced but a farmer is quite entitled to buy water from that overall pool of available water (even if they have sold other water to the commonwealth).

“The majority of water in every river in the system is – quite properly - left in in the river for the environment. When the basin plan is fully implemented 75% of the water that goes into the Murray Darling basin catchment overall will never be diverted.

“When water is extracted to grow cotton and other crops it makes a significant contribution to the wellbeing of a community, in Goondiwindi for example 40% of local jobs are directly agriculture related.

“Lateline called into question the value of publicly funded Water Use Efficiency Schemes such as Healthy Headwaters. These schemes assist irrigators to make improvements in their water use efficiency, allowing them to return considerable quantities of water to the environment, while maintaining production and therefore the social and economic health of their communities.

“Approximately one third of all water recovery under the Basin Plan has been achieved through efficiency programs, and it has been independently proven that they minimise the social and economic impact on communities, when compared with the alternative of direct government purchase of water entitlements.

“There is still a lot of hard work to go to implement the basin plan and irrigators are willing to work with all sides to ensure we can achieve the triple bottom line aims of the plan.

“NIC doesn’t defend the basin plan because it’s great for irrigators and our communities – it has been (and will continue to be) very tough and it has cost hundreds of jobs in small rural communities. We defend it because we know the alternative of starting again is untenable and would be a disaster for the environment and communities.”

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