

National Irrigators' Council Strategic Plan 2015-2020



The National Irrigators' Council is the national peak body representing irrigators in Australia, supporting 27 member organisations covering the Murray Darling Basin states, irrigation regions and the major agricultural commodity groups. Membership of the Council includes water entitlement holders and irrigation infrastructure operators.

The Council represents the voice of those involved in irrigated agriculture who produce food and fibre for Australia and significant export income. The total gross value of irrigated agricultural production in Australia in 2012-13 was \$13.4 billion. {Australian Bureau of Statistics} Irrigated agriculture produces essential food such as milk, fruit, vegetables, rice, grains, sugar, nuts, meat and other commodities such as cotton and wine. The Council aims to develop policy and projects to ensure the efficiency, viability and sustainability of Australian irrigated agriculture and the security and reliability of water entitlements.

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1. Strategic Direction

Introduction

The National Irrigators' Council (NIC) is the national peak body for irrigated agriculture in Australia. The NIC is the policy and political voice for those who use water for commercial agricultural purposes.

The national body's twenty seven (27) member organisations are located in irrigation regions across the Australia. They represent a diversity of organisations from irrigation infrastructure operators to agricultural commodity groups who produce food and fibre for domestic consumption and significant export income. Commodities include milk, grains, rice, sugar, meat, nuts, vegetables, cotton and wine. The total gross value of irrigated agricultural production in Australia was \$13.4 billion in 2012-13 constituting 28% of the total gross value of all agricultural production (\$48 billion) for the same period. *{Australian Bureau of Statistics}*

The national body is funded by irrigators, for irrigators. Members are not individual irrigators but members of their respective representative organisations. An irrigator is defined as 'a person or body with irrigation entitlement for commercial agricultural production'.

The NIC is a non-federated body with equal voting rights on all issues including policy development. The organisation is committed to representing all irrigators regardless of their location or the food and fibre they produce. Adoption of policy is on a consensus basis.

The NIC works towards a vibrant, sustainable irrigation industry and to secure the long term interests of our Members and our industry. The NIC advocates on behalf of irrigated agriculture, developing policies and undertaking projects that benefit these aims. The NIC lobbies governments, statutory authorities and other relevant organisations for their adoption.

The national body's guiding principles inform its strategic direction and policy decisions.

Guiding Principles

The objective of the National Irrigators' Council is to protect or enhance water as a property right and to champion a vibrant sustainable irrigation industry.

- 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.

Vision, Mission and Objectives

Our Vision

Our Vision is for a vibrant, sustainable irrigation industry.

Our Mission

Our mission is to secure the long term interests of our Members and our industry.

Our Objectives

Our objectives are to:

- 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.

2. Strategic Environment

The NIC was founded in 2008 in response to over a decade of significant water reform. Following the audit report of water use in the Murray-Darling Basin, published in 1995, a permanent Cap on diversions was introduced in July 1997. This along with the 1994 COAG Water Reform Framework and the 2004 National Water Initiative altered the policy framework for Australia's water management. These initiatives heralded the beginning of shared commitment by all governments to increase the efficiency and sustainability of Australia's water use. In 2007 the Commonwealth Water Act was introduced, legitimising the Commonwealth's role in the management of the water resources of the Murray-Darling Basin.

Water reform has changed the face of irrigated agriculture. It has enabled water property rights a functioning water market and a level of certainty for irrigators across the Basin. Ultimately, however, implementation of reform results in a reduced share of productive water for irrigation. Limiting productivity has flow on social and economic impacts in irrigation dependent industries and communities. Impacts from water reform, and in particular the implementation of the Basin Plan, remain our biggest challenge.

While the Commonwealth's proposal to develop northern Australia and new irrigation green fields sites in Tasmania has sparked a degree of optimism for growing irrigated agriculture in Australia, this is necessarily tempered by the barriers that remain for business and which threaten industry competitiveness. These include rising business input costs, (especially electricity costs) and unnecessary barriers to productivity and profitability (the red and green tape of government).

The unstable political environment also adds to the complexity of the strategic environment. Opportunities for well-informed debate on the national benefit of food and fibre production are limited by complex alliances in the Senate, the momentum of the twenty four hour news cycle and the appetite of social media. These limitations are magnified by an increased public consciousness on environment and climate change.

3. Strategic Objectives

The high level strategic objectives of the NIC are to:

Continue to be recognised by government and industry as the national peak body for irrigated agriculture

It is important to ensure the sustainability of the NIC's current membership and to identify opportunities to grow membership across all states and territories to build the organisation's reputation as the national peak body for irrigated agriculture.

Relationships developed with Government, political leaders across all parties and senior officials from Commonwealth agencies enable the NIC direct access to decision makers and build the reputation of the organisation as a visible advocate for the sector.

Developing strategic alliances with multiple stakeholders will enable the NIC to grow its reputation and lead sector peak bodies on issues impacting on irrigated agriculture.

NIC will build on its policy platform by providing submissions to Government inquiries, issue media statements and provide opinion pieces to ensure the visibility of the organisation in its role as the national peak body for irrigated agriculture and the voice of irrigation communities.

Protect or enhance water as a property right

Water entitlement reform was a fundamental building block of the 2004 National Water Initiative. The agreement established a property right to water which is a share of the available resource. It required governments to improve the security and commercial certainty of entitlements by documenting how water users would bear the risks of reduced entitlements if water became scarce.

When water users have a legally-defined share of water that is safe from government interference, illegal take and arbitrary change, it becomes a financial asset. This can be used in much the same way as land held as a financial asset; it can be bought and sold, borrowed against and used to invest.

The principle of water as a property right must be upheld. Water property rights provide our members with authority over their asset, allowing them exclusive access to the asset and the right to exclude others from accessing this right. Water property rights provide an important underpinning in support of business investment and form part of the assets of a business enterprise.

The existence of property rights in water is considered a necessary precondition to water trading. Property rights are recognised as being stable, secure and flexible and are capable of sustaining a water market.

Promote the importance of irrigated agriculture

Irrigated agriculture is a major economic contributor to the nation. Food and fibre production from Australia's diverse irrigation communities, contributes to Australia's manufacturing sector.

Opportunities for well-informed debate on the national benefit of food and fibre production are limited. These limitations are magnified by an increased public consciousness and debate on environment and climate change issues.

The NIC will continue to promote at every opportunity through stakeholders and the media, at a national and local level, the positive contribution of irrigated agriculture and flow on benefits to irrigation communities.

The Strategic Plan will be reviewed by members on an annual basis. It is supported by a multi-year Business Plan and annual work plan on agreed priority areas.

