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Science and data flaws require political intervention

Significant flaws and a lack of certainty in the science and data used by the Murray Darling Basin Authority highlight the need for elected politicians to take control of the Basin Plan process.

The National Irrigators' Council has lodged its submission to the MDBA's "Guide to the proposed Basin Plan" which outlines the problem of relying on "science" alone to make decisions about the Basin's future.

"The MDBA admits in the Guide that the science and data it has used comes with only a medium level of confidence and that it has little evidence to be sure of successful outcomes from environmental watering," said NIC CEO Danny O'Brien.

"These flaws highlight that this needs to be a judgement call made by elected politicians after weighing up the best available science, social and economic impacts and the views of affected stakeholders."

Examples of the problems with the Guide that are highlighted in the submission include:

- Increased flooding – one environmental target for the Lower Goulburn floodplain in Victoria would see at least a three-fold increase in the number of floods the size of that which caused at least \$2 million damage to Shepparton in early September. This is despite the Authority claiming that the risk of flooding would be "low" (p. 18 of the submission)
- One scientific report recommending flows of 250,000 ML/day to meet black box woodland watering targets on the Chowilla floodplain in SA, when flow of that size has only occurred once in 110 years (p. 12)
- Data that indicates that end-of system flows are proportionally higher for the Gwydir system (38 per cent of inflows), which ends in a closed wetland, than for the Border Rivers (36 per cent) which flows freely downstream (p. 15)
- Sustainable Rivers Audit – Relied on heavily by the MDBA as an indicator of river health, it shows that two-thirds of rivers were in "moderate to good" hydrologic health, indicating that non-flow related issues are a problem, yet the only solution offered by the Guide is more water (p. 13)

The submission is also highly critical of the poor process undertaken by the MDBA and of confusion created by differing interpretations of the Water Act 2007.

"Clearly the MDBA's view is that the Water Act gives priority to the environment. That being the case, the MDBA should be advising the Government that this is not consistent with the Government's commitment to a triple bottom line outcome," Mr O'Brien said.

The submission also highlights the opportunity for engineering solutions to provide more water to the environment, an option that has been largely ignored by the MDBA.

The submission is online at www.irrigators.org.au.

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