

Wednesday, 16 December 2009

## IRRIGATORS WARN ON CUTS – DON'T DECIMATE OUR COMMUNITIES

Irrigators have warned the Murray Darling Basin Authority not to disregard the social and economic impacts of less water for irrigation as it develops a Basin Plan which will set new limits on water diversions.

The National Irrigators' Council has today lodged a submission to the MDBA issues paper on Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) which criticises the Authority for its approach to social and economic analysis of cuts to water availability.

NIC CEO Danny O'Brien said irrigators are concerned that the MDBA seems intent on using social and economic analysis only to *describe* the impact of possible cuts, not to ameliorate them. He said their view had only been reinforced after a two-day MDBA forum this week on the proposed Basin Plan.

"While we obviously support a healthy environment we also expect that any impacts on irrigators and their communities will be taken into account when new SDLs are set for the Basin. After all, irrigators produce food and fibre for the nation and export dollars for our economy.

"The MDBA can't just use the social and economic analysis to describe what might happen when water availability is cut. That would be akin to a bystander describing a house fire as it occurs but doing nothing to help," Mr O'Brien said.

"It must actually use that information to inform its decisions on water sharing between the environment and irrigators.

"For example, if the Basin Plan identifies that the environment's needs in a particular valley mean a cut of 20 per cent to the consumptive pool is necessary, but social and economic analyses show that the local community would suffer irreparable damage from any cut greater than 15 per cent, then that must be used to balance the final decision on the size of the cut.

"This is consistent with section 3(c) of the *Water Act* which states that the Basin's resources should be managed in a way that "*optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes*".

Mr O'Brien said the NIC submission was a warning to the MDBA and all governments that the needs of food producers and their communities must be balanced with those of the environment.

The NIC has also raised concern about the Basin Plan using measures such as gross value of production or returns per megalitre when deciding where to source water for the environment.

"Picking winners and losers is not what the Basin Plan should be about – decisions about water being put to its highest value use should be decided by the market, not an environmental watering plan.

"Governments have a strong history of failure when they try and pick winners."

The NIC is also concerned that the MDBA will struggle to complete or collate all the research it needs before the deadline of the middle of next year.