

Wednesday, 13 January 2010

MDBA MUST OPEN UP ON ENVIRONMENTAL ASSETS

The Murray Darling Basin Authority must release a list of environmental assets it will be targeting for watering under the new Basin Plan as soon as possible if the community is to retain any faith in the plan process.

The National Irrigators' Council said today it was disturbed that the MDBA had so far failed to publicly identify what the environmental assets are, what their water needs are and what environmental outcomes the Authority is aiming to achieve.

NIC CEO Danny O'Brien said irrigators would lose faith in the process of restoring the environment in the MDB if they didn't have a clear indication of what new environmental water is to be used for.

"We wrote to the MDBA seeking a list of the wetlands, lakes, forests and other assets that the MDBA will aim to protect and restore with increased environmental flows under the proposed Basin Plan.

"The vague response suggests we will not see such a list until the draft Plan is released for comment in the middle of this year.

"This begs the question – does the MDBA even know what it is meant to be protecting? We are constantly told that the need to protect the environment is urgent, so surely someone has an idea of what it is that needs protecting?

"The fact is irrigators will lose water to help protect these assets so we need to be informed of what they are, their water needs, how they have been chosen and what the measures of success will be.

"The Commonwealth is in the middle of spending \$3.1 billion buying up water entitlements from irrigation communities but at the moment we don't even know what it will be used for. The Productivity Commission recently criticised the government for just this point – buying water before it knows what it intends to do with it.

"Irrigators have a key stake in both the environmental health of our water resources and the buyback program but they, like the rest of the community, are being kept in the dark."

Mr O'Brien said the Basin Plan would have to prioritise the assets to be targeted because it was impossible to provide sufficient water to every asset in the Basin when human and agricultural needs are also considered.

"We need to have a frank debate about the key assets that need to be protected and the MDBA needs to kick-start that debate by outlining its thinking on what those key assets and their water requirements might be.

"Providing the list only when the Basin Plan has already been drafted is not good enough. Irrigators are determined that there needs to be balance between the needs of the environment and those of irrigation communities and food production and that can't be achieved until we know what the needs of the environment actually are.

"The MDBA must come clean on the list of assets it wants to protect as soon as possible," Mr O'Brien concluded.

Media contact: Danny O'Brien (02) 6273 3637 or 0438 130 445