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Irrigators focus on environmental outcomes, not numbers

Irrigators will judge Murray Darling Basin reform on environmental outcomes and balance with social and economic impacts, not a simplistic focus on numbers and volume that ignore the complexity of river management.

These views are among issues listed in a position paper released today by the National Irrigators' Council titled "A Balanced Plan for the Murray Darling Basin".

The NIC says reform will require trade-offs to balance competing environmental, economic and social objectives, that river health requires more than just additional volumes of water and that investment in irrigation and environmental infrastructure provides a win-win outcome.

NIC CEO Danny O'Brien said water reform must not ignore the concerns of basin communities and a healthy river requires more than just additional flow volume.

"Irrigators support a healthy river – we rely on it more than most – and we support water being returned through voluntary buybacks. But there's so much more that needs to be done than just purchasing water. Things like addressing riparian vegetation, alien fish species and pollution are critical, as is the way new environmental holdings are used."

Other key issues for irrigators include:

- A focus on infrastructure efficiency programs and research, development and extension;
- A better buyback that takes into account community impacts and leaves a more efficient irrigation delivery system;
- Works and measures to ensure more efficient delivery of environmental water;
- Genuine engagement with local communities and the active involvement of the states as managers of the resource;
- Acceptance that water sharing decisions must be made by elected and accountable politicians informed by best available science. Science alone can't determine the outcome.
- A clear environmental watering plan and advice on the intentions of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder with respect to water trading; and
- Fair treatment of all water users, including interception activities.

Mr O'Brien said irrigators will use the position paper as a reference for the success or failure of MDBA, Commonwealth and State Government policies and programs over the coming 12 months or so, noting that this is a broad overview, not a solution to every issue facing the Basin.

"If we are going to have successful reform, it must be balanced and it must address all aspects of river health, as well as the genuine needs of basin communities and our food and fibre producers. The obsession with numbers is a fatuous one that won't get us anywhere," Mr O'Brien concluded.

The full position paper is available at www.irrigators.org.au on the "Policy" page.

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