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Irrigators seek Productivity Commission review of Basin Plan

A Productivity Commission review of the impacts of the draft Murray Darling Basin Plan heads the list of policies sought by irrigators from political parties contesting the upcoming Federal Election.

The National Irrigators' Council today released its 2010 Federal Election Policy Platform which has been provided to all major political parties.

NIC CEO, Danny O'Brien, said irrigators wanted to see balance between the needs of the environment and those of irrigators, food production and rural communities in the Basin Plan, due for release late next month.

"While we are not judging the plan before its release, we are gravely concerned at the prospect of significant cuts to irrigation water availability and we think the impact of any proposed cuts should be adequately assessed. We believe the Productivity Commission, as the nation's premier independent economic policy adviser, should examine the draft plan and report back to government on the likely economic and social impacts before the final plan is signed off.

"The inquiry should investigate matters such as the opportunity cost of environmental water, optimisation of environmental, economic and social outcomes, management of trade-offs, the role of other activities such as land management and infrastructure works and the implementation of risk assignment provisions.

"Irrigators expect to work closely with the next government on the exact terms of reference for an inquiry and the implementation of any of its recommendations."

Mr O'Brien said the NIC is also seeking a commitment from the incoming government to "buy-out" any gap between current water use and new sustainable diversion limits (SDLs).

"We believe governments should continue to invest in efficiency savings and purchases from willing sellers to recover water for the environment rather than reduce reliability or entitlements for irrigators who want to stay in business and keep producing food and fibre for all Australians."

Other policy items in the platform include:

- Commitment to the current funding allocated for infrastructure upgrades and buyback.
- Commitment to scientific assessment and measurement of environmental watering programs and the transparent reporting of that assessment.
- Recognition that communities will suffer through reduced water availability and government investment in alternative economic opportunities will be necessary.
- Further funding for water-use efficiency programs outside the Murray-Darling Basin.
- A commitment to further reform to improve the property right status of water entitlements.
- A reduction in red-tape associated with water planning, management and delivery.

The paper also notes that irrigators are opposed to any further Commonwealth involvement in water management, including in the MDB.

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