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Yarra's prize makes mockery of Murray-Darling "crisis"

The short-listing of Melbourne's Yarra River for the International Riverprize, billed as the "world's most prestigious environmental prize", just goes to highlight how farcical the debate over river health has become.

The National Irrigators' Council said while the Yarra is being lauded as among the world's best, the Murray-Darling Basin – which has more water available for environmental flows – is said to be in "crisis" and need of "saving".

"For all the hand-wringing over the health of the Murray-Darling, it's salient to remember that it has 58 per cent of flows available to the environment¹, while the Yarra has only 57 per cent,²" said NIC CEO Danny O'Brien.

"Yet management of the Yarra is now short-listed for an award while irrigators and their communities are facing the prospect of massive withdrawals of water for consumptive purposes in the Murray Darling. How can this be?"

Mr O'Brien said NIC was not suggesting major problems in the Yarra – and congratulated Melbourne Water for the improvements in river health – but noted that there appeared to be a double standard operating between city and country.

"We all want a healthy river system – irrigators rely on it more than most – but we have to get this into perspective. We support water being returned to the Murray-Darling through voluntary buybacks but it has to be in balance with the interests of basin communities and food and fibre production.

"I'm sure Melburnians would agree if they were faced with water cuts from the Yarra of up to 50 per cent like some of their counter-parts in the MDB."

Mr O'Brien also noted that increased environmental flows were not a feature of any of the three short-listed finalists for the Riverprize.

"We have long argued that river health is a complex beast and water alone will not fix the problem. There must be integrated catchment management to address issues such as riparian vegetation, alien fish species, pollution and noxious weeds.

"We note that the reasons the Yarra has been short-listed include 'better environmental laws, diversion of waste, restoring riverbanks and reduced stormwater pollution'.

"Let's hope our government's heed the lesson and don't try to fix the Murray-Darling simply by taking water from Basin communities and expecting that will work."

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¹ MDBA, Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan, Vol 1, pg XXIII

² Vic DSE, Central Region Sustainable Water Strategy, pg 22