

Thursday, 11 March 2010

## Basin Plan must balance environment and people

A statement by a group of scientists outlining what they want from a new Murray Darling Basin Plan completely ignores the social and economic impact of taking water from irrigation communities.

The National Irrigators' Council said while the statement made some useful points, it was disappointing that the scientists made no reference to people, food and fibre production and the needs of communities within the Basin.

"It's not surprising that the scientists would take such a position and it highlights why there needs to be balance in the debate and in the setting of new sustainable diversion limits," NIC CEO, Danny O'Brien said.

"It's just not credible to say what we need to do with the MDB environment without considering what the impacts will be on irrigators, rural communities and food and fibre production.

"We are also disappointed that the scientists have paid scant regard to the fact that the worst drought in history is responsible for most of the short-term problems in the basin and the only solution is rain.

"We accept that the Basin Plan will address some of the medium and longer-term problems and that this will probably entail cuts to water availability, but that will have significant impacts on irrigators and those impacts need to be taken into account."

Mr O'Brien said irrigators agreed with the scientists that water and land must be managed together and that long-term monitoring is a must.

"We believe a failing of the *Water Act* is that it only addresses the water aspects of the environment in the MDB, without consideration of wider natural resources management tools. We are also yet to see any indication of how the government will measure and monitor the success or otherwise of its watering programs."

Meanwhile, Mr O'Brien said the NIC was concerned that social and economic impact studies being undertaken for the Basin Plan were happening very late in the drafting process.

"Our members throughout the Basin are only just being contacted now as part of surveys to assess the potential impact of new SDLs.

"We understand that some of the key decisions about the Basin Plan, including the setting of SDLs, will be made in the next month or so, however some of the economic and social profile documents that are being circulated state that 'draft' versions will not be provided to the Murray Darling Basin Authority until 'late April'.

"Frankly we are very concerned that that will be too late in the process for the social and economic impacts to be adequately considered in the setting of SDLs."

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