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Basin Plan must be balanced – for everyone's sake

The proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan to be released this week will fail the nation if it doesn't adequately balance the needs of the environment, food and fibre production and regional communities.

The National Irrigators' Council is concerned that the Plan will focus too heavily on the environment to the detriment of all Australians.

"Irrigators are part of the reform process and we have made our contribution over recent years to returning flows to the environment," said NIC CEO, Danny O'Brien.

"We support a sustainable and healthy ecosystem – after all, we rely on it more than most. But efforts to return flows to the environment must be balanced with the needs of food and fibre production and the social and economic health of regional communities.

"An unbalanced Basin Plan will hurt all Australians – it will cost jobs, force up food prices and threaten farms that have been in families for generations.

"A recent report by Judith Stubbs and Associates estimated that a 25 per cent cut in water availability for irrigation in the MDB would cost the national economy \$1.4 billion annually and 14,000 jobs, while a 50 per cent cut would cost 28,000 jobs and \$2.7 billion in economic activity every year.

"We hope the MDBA's social and economic modelling makes clear the impacts that will be felt by all Australians from significant reductions in water availability."

Irrigators are also urging the Commonwealth not to back away from commitments to invest in infrastructure efficiencies as a means of supporting communities through the transition process.

"Investment in irrigation infrastructure to make it more efficient helps save water for the environment and lets farmers produce more crop per drop. That production flows through to secondary industries and local communities and will at least help maintain production with less water.

"Recent advice from central agencies and some scientists that the Government should redirect money away from infrastructure programs toward buyback should be rejected.

"Of course buying back the water will be cheaper for the budget bottom line, but at what community cost? Commitments to infrastructure improvements are a win-win for the environment and irrigation communities and are part of the political contract of reform.

"Any attempt to wind back infrastructure spending would only antagonise these communities and demolish any residual support for the reform program."

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