

Sunday, 17 October 2010

Irrigators welcome Government focus on environmental efficiency

Irrigators have welcomed the Federal Government's change of tone on water recovery in the Murray Darling Basin, saying that engineering works and measures can help deliver a better environment while reducing the need to remove water from rural communities.

Minister for Regional Australia, Simon Crean and Minister for Water, Tony Burke have both highlighted the importance of engineering solutions in comments in the media this weekend.

National Irrigators' Council CEO Danny O'Brien said it was welcome that Ministers were now beginning to focus on win-win opportunities rather than simply on buying back water, which takes a heavy toll on irrigation-dependent communities.

"Irrigators are being asked to become a lot more efficient and they are, and so they are also questioning the efficiency of environmental watering. There are a lot of projects that can be completed to get the same or similar environmental outcomes with a lot less water.

"For example with the installation of some weirs and regulators, a 5000 ha section of Lindsay Island on the Murray near the SA border can be watered with 90 gigalitres instead of 1200. This just makes common sense and is something the Government should rightly be focussed on."

Mr O'Brien said while these works can be part of the solution, they will not be a panacea.

"Government needs to recognise that it cannot get a triple bottom line outcome – that is environmental, social and economic – unless it steps in and issues directions to the MDBA or amends the *Water Act* to remove its singular focus on environmental outcomes.

"Irrigators accept the need for reform to ensure a healthy ecosystem, but it must be balanced with consideration of the needs of food and fibre production and regional communities. If it is not balanced, the reform process will fail.

"That's why it's critical that the new Parliamentary inquiry's terms of reference allow the committee to consider the Act."

Meanwhile the NIC welcomed moves by the MDBA announced today to undertake new social and economic impact assessments of its proposals, but questioned why they are being done now.

"The Authority has had 18 months to consider these impacts and it is not good enough that it is only now moving to undertake some serious work. This just highlights our point about the direction given to the Authority by the Act – if the legislation truly delivered a triple bottom line approach, then these sorts of studies would not be an afterthought.

"One final note to the MDBA – whichever firm told you taking a third of the water away from production would only cost 800 jobs, should not be considered for this new work."

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