**Statistics confirm: without irrigation in drought, we wouldn’t eat**

More than 90% of Australia’s fruit, nuts and grapes; more 76% of vegetables, 100% of rice and more than 50% of dairy and sugar, came from irrigation in 2018-19 according to the latest release from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

The figures are based on gross value of farm gate product and come from the 2018-19 [“Water Account](https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/environment/environmental-management/water-account-australia/2018-19)” and “[value of agricultural commodities](https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/agriculture/value-agricultural-commodities-produced-australia/2018-19)” publications.

Drought conditions meant the 2018-19 year saw lower agricultural water use, with total value of irrigated production down from $17.7 billion to $16.5 billion. The Murray Darling Basin was still the most significant irrigation area, but it saw the biggest impact with value of irrigated production dropping by 16% down to $7.2 billion.

CEO of the National Irrigators’ Council (NIC), Steve Whan said “even with drought, these values reflect the huge contribution irrigating farmers make to growing our food and fibre; generating jobs and income in regional communities; and for the nation.

“Three quarters of all our vegies come from irrigated agriculture. Without these farmers most Australians would be getting their vegies imported, frozen or in tins.

“We have one of the world’s most, and increasingly, variable climates. That’s why it is important, to every single Australian, that we sustainably store water for dry times.

“It is entirely unsurprising that water use by agriculture went down in 2018-19. This reflected drought and no water allocations, particularly in NSW.

“I do get a bit surprised at the lack of understanding from some commentators (even in the ABS’s own media release). In 2017-18 as drought hit, irrigation water use went up, reflecting water available in storages doing what it was designed to do – sustain production during drought. In 2018-19 as that water was also depleted, we saw zero water allocations for many irrigators and that meant many annual crops, like cotton and rice, were not planted.

“This demonstrates why annual crops are an important part of the agricultural picture. In years where there is water, cotton and rice generate income and jobs for country communities. In drought years scarce water goes to ‘permanent plantings’ like fruit and nut trees, grape vines etc. It also goes to things like fodder and stock feed to keep animals alive.

“Statistics around water use and production, are a vital part of showing Australians what their water is used for. It’s particularly important in the controversial Murray Darling. I have been disappointed to see significant changes to the information presented by the ABS - with no consultation with the Irrigation industry. In particular, this year’s ABS figures arrive six months later and have less information on the Murray Darling Basin.”

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