

BY DAVID WROE ENVIRONMENT CORRESPONDENT

FLOODPLAIN graziers are offering the federal government a Christmas present in the form of a legal right to flood their properties — a gesture that could remove a key obstacle to boosting river flows in the Murray-Darling Basin.

Nearly a million acres of land have already been signed up to voluntary “flood easements”, which environmentally minded livestock farmers hope will let the government pump more water back into the system than the 2750 billion litres being discussed under the controversial Murray-Darling Basin draft plan.

Environment Minister Tony Burke told *The Age* the offering could make “a significant difference” in the previously bruising talks on the draft plan to restore the health of the river system.

The Australian Floodplain Association, which represents graziers and environmentalists, has brought together property owners across the basin who are prepared to waive their right to sue the government if it floods their land. This could remove a key objection from irrigators that putting too much water back into the river system will cause flooding and damage private property.

It will also please environmentalists who are unhappy with the 2750 billion-litre figure in the draft plan and argue that at least 4000 billion litres is needed to flush salt through the Murray mouth and restore floodplains & wetlands.

The association has nearly a million acres signed up — roughly half the size of greater Melbourne — and expects to have several million acres by early next year.

“It looks to me in the basin plan that the government is baulking at returning enough water to the system and they’re saying that they can’t go flooding private land,” said Mark Etheridge, a sheep grazier and president of the Australian Floodplain Association. “We’re saying, ‘Yes please, flood us and we’ll indemnify you by creating voluntary easements’. We can’t be flooded enough.”

He said floodplain pastures became about 20 times more productive after a flood, a natural part of the river cycle. The association is working with Friends of the Earth and law firm Baker & McKenzie, which is working pro bono.

Mr Burke and the independent Murray-Darling Basin Authority have argued that the basin is now a man-made environment with farms, towns, bridges, canals and other infrastructure that pose limits or “constraints” on how much water can flow through the system. If water managers cause a river to overflow, surrounding property owners could sue the government.

Mr Burke said the graziers’ gesture could make a big difference, though the government needed to consider other factors, including the economic impact on irrigation communities.

“Flooding of private property is not the only capacity constraint. It also goes to river rules, channel sizes and the heights of bridges and roads,” he said. “But depending on the location and the number of easements, this could have a significant impact on a number of discussions taking place.”

Friends of the Earth spokesman Jonathan La Nauze said: “This case also busts open the myth that there’s only one kind of farmer out there. In fact 69 per cent of farmers in the basin are not irrigators and . . . many of them are only too willing to facilitate an increase in environmental flows.”

Grape grower and chairman of Murray-Darling Wetlands Inc Howard Jones said: “People shouldn’t live on flood plains if they don’t expect to be flooded.”

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