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NEW SOUTH WALES
IRRIGATORS'
COUNCIL

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SUBMISSION

Draft Riverina Murray Important Agricultural Land Mapping

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Introduction

The NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC) is the peak body representing irrigation farmers and the irrigation farming industry in NSW. Our Members include valley water user associations, food and fibre groups, irrigation corporations and commodity groups from the rice, cotton, dairy and horticultural industries. Through our members, NSWIC represents 12,000 water access licence holders in NSW who access regulated, unregulated and groundwater systems.

NSWIC engages in advocacy and policy development on behalf of the irrigation farming sector. As an apolitical entity, the Council provides advice to all stakeholders and decision makers.

Irrigation farmers are stewards of tremendous local, operational and practical knowledge in water management. With over 12,000 irrigation farmers in NSW, there is a wealth of knowledge available. To best utilise this knowledge requires participatory decision making and extensive consultation to ensure this knowledge can be incorporated into best-practice, evidence-based policy. NSWIC and our Members are a valuable way for Governments and agencies to access this knowledge.

NSWIC welcomes this public exhibition as an opportunity to work with the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) to incorporate local, practical and operational knowledge and expertise in water management. NSWIC offers the expertise from our network of irrigation farmers and organisations on an ongoing basis to ensure water management is practical, community-minded and follows participatory process.

This submission represents the views of the Members of NSWIC with respect to the *Draft Riverina Murray Important Agricultural Land Mapping*. However, each member reserves the right to independent policy on issues that directly relate to their areas of operation, expertise or any other issues that they deem relevant.



Overview

NSWIC welcomes land mapping of Important Agricultural Land. It is vital that information of this kind is available to decision-makers to ensure important food and fibre production lands are retained, and land use conflicts are minimised. Having accurate, relevant, and up-to-date data available will lead to more evidence-based decision making, and assist to secure valuable agricultural assets. NSWIC values this work of DPI in ensuring that a sound evidence-base is available to guide decision making, and wishes to thank the team at DPI for engaging NSWIC and our Members during this process.

NSWIC provides 11 recommendations on the *Draft Riverina Murray Important Agricultural Land Mapping*:

Recommendation 1: The definition, criteria, objectives and legal status of Important Agriculture Land requires clarification.

Recommendation 2: The criteria or key considerations used to determine IAL in each region should be included with the map.

Recommendation 3: The legal effect of IAL requires clarification, and IAL needs to be distinguished from Biophysical Strategic Agricultural Land as well as State Significant Agricultural Land.

Recommendation 4: Further scoping is necessary to ensure all important irrigated agricultural land is included. NSWIC is willing to assist in a liaising role.

Recommendation 5: A criteria is needed when identifying buffer zones along waterways.

Recommendation 6: IAL should include future-trends, such as potential future land-use and crop-type. The area surrounding Hay has rapidly expanding irrigation (largely for cotton) which does not appear included in the IAL mapping.

Recommendation 7: A process should be established for amendments to allow for the inclusion of any additional information as it becomes available, and for a review period.

Recommendation 8: There must be a strong nexus between the IAL map and planning practitioners.

Recommendation 9: Continue working with agricultural industry representatives to ensure the best-available information is brought forward to inform decision making.

Recommendation 10: Coleambally Irrigation's West Coleambally Channel should be included as IAL in the Riverina Murray.

Recommendation 11: NSWIC seeks clarification of whether biosecurity was a consideration in determining IAL.



Submission

Recommendation 1: The definition, criteria, objectives and legal status of Important Irrigated Agriculture Land requires clarification

NSWIC recommends that a more specific definition of Important Agricultural Land is developed. This would help both decision makers, planners, landholders and the community better understand IAL and the usage. The current definition of IAL, as defined in the *NSW DPI Guideline to Identifying Important Agricultural Lands in NSW*, is:

“existing or future location of local or regionally important agricultural industries or resources as mapped that is consistent with the NSW DPI Guideline to Identifying Important Agricultural Lands in NSW”¹.

NSWIC interprets this definition as that IAL is any land mapped under this process. This definition would benefit from being more precise, and focused on the objectives and characteristics of IAL.

For example, the definition of IAL should include:

- What makes IAL important agricultural land (e.g. characteristics)?
- What is the criteria or considerations for IAL? What determines inclusions and exclusions?
- What is the purpose or objective of identifying an area as IAL?
- How will this be used in practice?
- Does IAL have any legal effect?

Having a more detailed definition of IAL would help to ensure IAL is widely and clearly recognised and understood, utilised by practitioners, and valued by communities.

Recommendation 2: The criteria or key considerations used to determine IAL in each region should be included with the map.

NSWIC was informed that there is no rigid criteria to determine IAL as every region has unique characteristics and requires flexibility in what will be defined as IAL. NSWIC supports this approach as it is important to ensure the unique characteristics of each region can be valued and incorporated as suitable. However, there would be benefit in publishing a flexible outline of the key considerations, in-lieu of a formal criteria, to give guidance on how IAL was selected. This would provide both clarification and transparency on why certain areas were included/excluded. Furthermore, this would ensure that IAL mapping would have the broadest possible application, as practitioners could identify what characteristics within IAL are valued in particular circumstances.

¹ NSW Department of Primary Industries, Agricultural Land Use Planning, ‘A guideline to identifying important agricultural lands in NSW’ (2017).



NSWIC understands that the considerations included:

- Biophysical (soil classes, rainfall);
- Social (branding); and
- Economic (proximity to market or processing facilities).

It would be beneficial to include the exact considerations within each of these categories for each region to provide more informative data, and to guide the utilisation of this data by practitioners.

Recommendation 3: The legal effect of IAL requires clarification, and IAL needs to be distinguished from Biophysical Strategic Agricultural Land as well as State Significant Agricultural Land .

There currently exists datasets for Biophysical Strategic Agricultural Land (BSAL) in NSW. NSWIC recommends that NSW DPI provides guidance on how IAL differs from BSAL, what different purposes they serve, and how they will relate in practice.

The definition of BSAL on the Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) website is:

*“Biophysical Strategic Agricultural Land (BSAL) is land with high quality soil and water resources capable of sustaining high levels of productivity”.*²

BSAL has legal effect. Any State significant mining or coal seam gas proposal on BSAL is subject to an additional level of scrutiny via the Gateway process. Additionally, a State significant mining or CSG proposal on BSAL must be referred to the Commonwealth Independent Expert Scientific Committee and the NSW Minister for Primary Industries for advice on potential water resource impacts.

NSWIC understands that the difference between IAL and BSAL is:

- IAL is not intended to be legislated at this stage, whereas BSAL is;
- BSAL just looks at biophysical, IAL also includes social and economic considerations;
- BSAL was mainly developed in the context of CSG/mining.

NSWIC seeks clarification on this difference, and particularly on the intended legal status of IAL. NSWIC requests to know whether IAL will also have a similar legal effect as BSAL, and how (if at all) they are differentiated both in principle and in practice.

Consideration should be given as to how this important information will be used by practitioners and planners in decision making. There needs to be an impetus for decision makers to utilise this resource whilst not creating further red-tape or impediments to on-farm or further irrigation development.

² Department of Planning & Environment, Safeguarding our Agricultural Land, 'Biophysical Strategic Agricultural Land' (Accessed 21 December 2018). Available at: <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Policy-and-Legislation/Mining-and-Resources/Safeguarding-our-Agricultural-Land>



Recommendation 4: Further scoping is necessary to ensure all important irrigated agricultural land is included. NSWIC is willing to assist in a liaising role.

NSWIC is pleased that DPI have contacted irrigation bodies to seek mapping data. We have been informed that Murrumbidgee Irrigation, Coleambally Irrigation Cooperative Limited, and Murray Irrigation all provided spatial data to the IAL mapping program under license agreements in June 2018. NSWIC wishes to thank our members who have participated in providing data for this process.

NSWIC understands that data to inform the *Draft Riverina Murray Important Agricultural Land Mapping* came from a variety of other sources, including:

- The BRS (2008) Combined Irrigation Areas of Australia Dataset from the Murray Darling Basin Authority
- The NSW Office of Environment and Heritage 2013 Land Use spatial layer.

NSWIC acknowledges the difficulties DPI may have had accessing data in some circumstances. Where this has occurred, NSWIC offers to be of assistance in liaising with irrigation farmers and irrigation organisations to ensure requests for data reach the most appropriate contacts and the best available data is included in this process.

NSWIC has been informed that data was not able to be obtained regarding the Hillston and Goolgowi Irrigation areas. NSWIC is currently liaising with colleagues with the aim of securing this data to provide to DPI. NSWIC advises that this mapping process should not be finalised until this data has been obtained and incorporated. This is because of the importance of this area for irrigation, and the need to ensure the most up-to-date, accurate and representative data is incorporated. Whilst the alternative data source (OEH 2013 Land Use spatial layer) can be informative, this data should be accompanied by more precise irrigation-specific data given the prominence of this region for irrigated agriculture.

Recommendation 5: A criteria is needed when identifying buffer zones along waterways.

NSWIC understands that a 10km buffer was applied along the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers, a 5km buffer was applied along the Lachlan River, and a 2km buffer was applied along the Billabong and Yanco Creeks. NSWIC seeks greater clarification of how these numbers were determined.

NSWIC recommends that the Yanco Creek buffer zone is extended to at least 5km given the importance and extent of irrigated agriculture along this waterway.

When determining buffer zones along waterways, NSWIC recommends that flexible criteria be developed to determine the extent of the buffer zone. Considerations should include the quantity of licenses held, the security of licenses, established infrastructure, crop type, the demand for water (constant, variable or seasonal), the availability of water, pump size, historical and social/community values, and future agricultural opportunities.



Recommendation 6: IAL should include future-trends, such as potential future land-use and crop-type. The area surrounding Hay has rapidly expanding irrigation (largely for cotton) which does not appear included in the IAL mapping.

IAL mapping should consider trends in agricultural production and changing land-use. New production areas are emerging which reshape land-use patterns in a region. For example, there is a significant increase in permanent plantings (nuts) which affects water usage. These trends should be reflected in IAL maps.

It is important that IAL includes both 'potential' and 'actual' IAL. Land may have agricultural importance even though it may currently be under-developed, or developing. Including both potentially important, and currently important, agricultural land will help ensure future-growth opportunities are fostered / not restricted by development and planning. Classification of potential IAL should adopt a precautionary approach to maintain valuable agricultural assets.

Recommendation 7: A process should be established for amendments to allow for the inclusion of any additional information as it becomes available, and for a review period.

A review process with a specified review time period is recommended to ensure that mapping stays up-to-date and relevant. There is risk that mapping becomes static, which is problematic given the agricultural sector is rapidly changing in many regions. A review period, and clear mechanism for amendments based on new knowledge or changing land-use, would ensure that information remains up to date.

There should be a clearly outlined process for how individuals, organisations or Local Government / Council can submit requests for inclusions or amendments to IAL. This would allow IAL mapping to be dynamic and continue to be accurate and representative.

Recommendation 8: There must be a strong nexus between the IAL map and planning practitioners.

Whilst IAL mapping is vital for building the evidence-base for decision makers, for the positive impacts to be realised, there must be strong consideration as to how decision makers can use the data. If there will not be a legislated requirement for relevant decision makers to give consideration to this data, then there must be communications to ensure relevant decision makers and practitioners are aware of this tool and how to incorporate it in their decision making. Whilst the guideline is available, NSWIC hopes this is supported by training sessions and followed up with ongoing communications.

The draft map enables a degree of interactivity. Further iterations would benefit from the inclusion of search function to improve efficiency of identifying the land/site of interest, and



a system (e.g. colour coding or icons) to describe the values which make the site classified as IAL.

Recommendation 9: Continue working with agricultural industry representatives to ensure the best-available information is brought forward to inform decision making.

NSWIC notes in the *Guideline to identifying Important Agricultural Land* that:

“The approach recognises that agricultural industry representatives often have considerable and highly relevant local knowledge about important resources for agriculture, suitable locations for agricultural industries and the key challenges and constraints. However, this information is rarely documented or readily available to inform evidence-based strategic planning. Collating such information and identifying the most important resource combinations is an integral component in identifying IAL.”

NSWIC values this process for recognising the valuable knowledge held by people on the ground. NSWIC strongly supports any process which seeks to make this information more accessible to decision makers. NSWIC offers to assist in a liaising role to help acquire any further information.

Recommendation 10: Coleambally Irrigations West Coleambally Channel should be included as IAL in the Riverina Murray.

Please find a detailed map attached for inclusion.

Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited and the Government have invested significantly in the West Coleambally Channel infrastructure. Irrigation farmers in this area have also invested significantly in on-farm irrigation infrastructure. Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited have a memorandum of understanding with the landholders in this area who use the outfall water to irrigate. At present, this area is not included in the IAL map.

NSWIC was informed that the Coleambally outfall area (along with the Wah Wah irrigation area from the Murrumbidgee irrigation area, and the Gumly irrigation area) were not included as they are outflow areas. NSWIC was informed that although these areas are situated within irrigation areas, the land is not primarily used for irrigated agricultural production as the land is used for water dispersal rather than water utilisation. However, outflow areas cannot be assumed to be primarily for water dispersal, as many outflow areas are used significantly for agricultural production, and have significant irrigation infrastructure investments and agreements with landowners. In circumstances where outflow areas are used for significant agricultural production (such as Coleambally Irrigations West Coleambally Channel), they should be included as IAL.



Recommendation 11: NSWIC seeks clarification of whether biosecurity was a consideration in determining IAL.

Biosecurity should be an important consideration in determining IAL. Some areas which are classified as pest-free have significant value for particular commodities. This is particularly important for quality assurance and meeting consumer preferences. NSWIC seeks clarification as to whether this was a consideration, and if not, recommends DPI include biosecurity in the determination of IAL.

Conclusion

NSWIC thanks DPI for engaging NSWIC throughout the consultation process.

NSWIC strongly supports efforts to identify IAL and to build an evidence base which leads to more informed decision-making, particularly relating to impacts of development on agricultural assets.

NSWIC welcomes DPI to contact NSWIC if we can be of assisting through a liasing role to ensure the best available data can be incorporated into this process. NSWIC also welcomes DPI to work with us on any of these recommendations.

Kind regards,

NSW Irrigators' Council.