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MEDIA RELEASE

South Australia's Royal Commission into the Murray Darling Basin

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The New South Wales Irrigators' Council (NSWIC), as the peak body for the NSW irrigated farming sector, has made a further review of South Australia's Royal Commission into the Murray Darling Basin. While the Council appreciates the Commissioner's statements about the value irrigation farmers, obligation of the nation to contribute towards compensation and the need to reject the unfair criticisms of irrigation farming. The Council is also happy that the report essentially confirms that the handful of water theft cases, which was the impetus for the Royal Commission, demonstrates that the 12,500 irrigators not accused have been doing the right thing.

Unfortunately, the Commissioner's report is dismissive of the impacts of water reform to date and rejects the obligation of the Plan to consider socio-economic considerations. While the NSWIC respects the Commissioner's opinion, we reject any callous disregard for rural communities in NSW. That is why the NSWIC urges all governments and political parties to legislate for a robust socio-economic impacts assessment to be undertaken and published as a Rural Communities Impact Statement (RCIS), prior to future public consultation on proposals or plans. Agencies and Governments should be upfront with the people of rural Australia about the impacts, whether that is in Menindee, Moree or the Murray communities.

The NSWIC also commends the State's Minister for Regional Water Niall Blair for his rejection of the cliched and hysterical criticism of farmers.

Mr Blair could not have been more accurate when he said that the crusade being waged against dairy, citrus, almond, grape, wheat, rice and cotton farmers must stop.

NSW Irrigators' Council CEO Luke Simpkins said successive governments had pursued the vision of developing inland NSW to secure the nation's food.

"We now have successive generation farmers – second, third, fourth and even fifth generations – who are watching their communities and the land they have invested so much in, simply deteriorate," Mr Simpkins said.

“Jumping on the hysteria of fish deaths, holding a single-lensed Royal Commission into the Plan and accepting its findings at face value makes great media but achieves little else,” he said.

“Our communities are doing it so tough, and simply can’t take much more,” he said. “They are over being victimised for producing the food and fibre we all enjoy, especially when they are participating in the Basin Plan which is all about handing water to the environment”.

Mr Simpkins said that the irrigated agriculture sector was diverse between states, regions and valleys and farms. People must take the time to understand the full situation and how the system works before jumping on harmful defamation bandwagons.

“Some irrigation systems work by gravity feed and our largest systems are measured to what they refer to as within a bucketful.”

In the emotional and ideologically-driven debate focused on the Darling River and Menindee Lakes, Mr Simpkins said it was convenient to lump all irrigation systems into the one bag and to assume guilt where none exists.

“But it’s not so convenient to acknowledge that the Snowy Scheme was created for the production of hydroelectricity and the creation of water for irrigated farming.”

Mr Simpkins said Minister Blair’s strong stance in support of the sector was courageous in the face of political correctness.

“He could have caved in to the headlines and betrayed the irrigation farming, dependent industries and rural towns in NSW but he’s prepared instead to stand by the responsibilities of his office and represent the facts,” Mr Simpkins said.

The New South Wales Irrigators’ Council is now looking forward to other NSW political leaders and parties standing by our state, our jobs and rural NSW towns. All parties will be judged by their actions from here. Do they want to see more jobs disappear and shops closing in Deniliquin, Griffith, Hay, Moree, Narrabri, and elsewhere? Or will they stand up for NSW and a history of success, efficiency and self-sufficiency. ENDS

For further information:

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Approved JC/TN