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## MEDIA RELEASE

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### Owing truth up & down the river

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The Australia Institute's report "Owing down the river" is a further appalling attempt at skewing the facts and turning Australians against their own farmers.

CEO of the NSW Irrigators' Council, Luke Simpkins, said "We can't emphasise enough – farmers can only use water when all environmental and human needs have been met".

"That is the legislative framework we have, which we respect, and that is why most farmers in the Barwon-Darling have no access to water and haven't had access to water for over 12 months.

"Even when we do have access to water, due to the rules, 94% of flows in the Barwon-Darling are reserved for the environment and only 6% is available for irrigation farmers.

"The reality is that farmers only take what is available under their licence conditions and very rarely is there an opportunity to use all the water they are licenced in the one event.

"It would be a nice problem to have if we got enough rain and inflows to provide full access for all categories of licences," Mr Simpkins said.

Barwon-Darling Water spokesman Ian Cole said the nature of the unregulated Barwon system is that it is boom or bust.

"We have extreme floods and drought, and the rules have been designed to recognise that and we respect those rules. The fact is that governments can still recover water for the environment which doesn't require changes in the Water Sharing Plans," Mr Cole said.

"For example, all flows in the past 12 months have been protected from extraction by the state government and our irrigators because of critical human needs on the river.

"In better times we are restricted by environmental flow rules, cease-to-pump thresholds and annual volumetric limits.

"The Australia Institute is an activist organisation misrepresenting the rules for political purposes.

“We would rather work with Government, as we always have, to improve outcomes through initiatives such as environmental flow rules, daily extraction limits and improving fish migration and fish habitats, so we can continue to be productive while improving the environmental,” Mr Cole said. ENDS.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The truth about the Barwon-Darling**

Part 4, Clause 17, of the Barwon-Darling Unregulated Water Sharing Plan (1)(b)(i), page 8 and 9 of 91 [1] shows that in the Barwon-Darling, 94% of water is reserved for the environment. That means, only 6% is for irrigation farmers to produce our much loved Australian food and fibre.

We must also remember that access to water by irrigation farmers has already been cut back from 527GL to just 173GL in 2007 under the Cap on Extractions [2]. This saw a massive reduction of 64% of water access to farmers in this region.

The Australia Institute report fails to identify that every river valley in the Basin is in Cap Credit, which even then, becomes obsolete later this year as the management and compliance system moves towards accounting with the Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs).

The entire purpose of SDLs is taking water from farmers for environmental needs. Our farmers are working with the SDLs in good faith to achieve the environmental needs required under the SDLs.

The Barwon-Darling farming community has already contributed 33GL (33 billion litres of water) to the environment under the SDLs, which is 27GL (27 billion litres of water) more than they were required to.

Our farmers and rural communities don't deserve to be criminalised for passing on their most precious resource.

In blaming the Barwon-Darling, clearly the Australia Institute didn't read The Independent Assessment of the 2018-19 Fish Deaths In The Lower Darling by Professor Vertessy, which said:

“The analysis of extractions, mid-system flows, and tributary inflows into the Barwon–Darling suggests that the majority of impacts from extractions on Menindee inflows, and therefore Menindee Lake volumes, are from tributaries above the Barwon–Darling and not the Barwon–Darling itself.” [3]

This just shows yet another harmful and unjustified example of finger pointing. We must always move towards best-practice policy, and finger-pointing and misinformation is only a move further from that outcome.

## **Water Sharing Plans have responsive instruments in place**

It is disgraceful that the Australia Institute totally misrepresents the sophistication of Water Sharing Plans, by describing them as unchangeable. The reality is that Water Sharing Plans have the sophistication of flexible measures embedded within them, so that the Water Sharing Plan can adapt and respond to changing water availability, without the need for a total overhaul.

This gives certainty that environmental needs can continue to be met, and also certainty to farming families about the likelihood of receiving a water allocation (if any at all).

We also must remember that the Minister can intervene at any time.

All Water Sharing Plans, including the Barwon-Darling, are undergoing review by the Natural Resource Commission, which is a statutory requirement.

## **Farmers are last in line for water**

We also must clarify that an ‘unregulated river’ is a river without a dam at the headwater – it is not a river without regulation. In fact, all river systems and water use in NSW is under very tight regulations.

Since there are no dams on this particular river system, farmers in this valley rely on natural flows, and their water access is directly related to the climate.

Farming in the driest continent on Earth requires lots of forward planning, and this means managing water appropriately in wet or flood years, to even out the severe impacts in dry years.

Farmers can only use water that they are allocated, and even then, they can only use it if the water is there, and after environmental and human needs are met.

“How can people think that those last in line for water (general security farmers), can impact those who are first in line (human needs and the environment)?”

“We must respect our farmers and respect our river system – to do this, we must all work towards best-practice policy, through informed public debate. Misleading and misinformed articles such as The Australia Institute’s report “Owing down the river” is counter to this.”

[1] Barwon-Darling Unregulated Water Sharing Plan, Part 4, Clause 17 (1)(b)(i) [p 8-9]. Available at: <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/~pdf/view/regulation/2012/488/full>

[2] The Barwon Darling Cap Management Strategy

[3] Vertessy, R. (2019) “The Independent Assessment of the 2018-19 Fish Deaths In The Lower Darling – Interim Report” [p26]. Available at: <https://www.mdba.gov.au/sites/default/files/pubs/Independent-assessment-2018-19-fish-deaths-interim-report.PDF>