

Level 5, 491 Kent Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

PO Box Q640,
Queen Victoria Building NSW 1230



Tel: 02 9264 3848
nswic@nswic.org.au
www.nswic.org.au

ABN: 49 087 281 746

MEDIA RELEASE

24 Hours on Now 4 Corners Must Correct the Facts! 09 July 2019

The ABC 4 Corners story yesterday on the efficiency programs in Murray Darling river systems contain significant factual errors and misunderstanding. Fundamentally they have chosen to prioritise sensationalism in place of providing balance and accurately presenting facts. 4 Corners allowed misrepresentation by a number of people claiming to be experts and who know exactly how the programs work but chose to pursue their own agenda regardless.

CEO of the NSW Irrigators' Council Luke Simpkins said, "What we have seen today from the backlash to the show, is that the ABC have been caught out misrepresenting our Aussie farmers, and the contributions they make to a sustainable and efficient agricultural industry."

'The story appears to intentionally undermine the confidence of the Australian people in how water is managed through the presentation of misleading information, error by omission, failing to check for facts and fostering sensationalised, emotional rhetoric.'

The program entirely misrepresented the aim of the water efficiency infrastructure initiative which is a form of water recovery mechanism by which the farmers save water to give it to the environment. The ABC and those individuals that have made these inaccurate claims must now correct the record.

"We didn't ask for the Basin Plan, but we have had to live with it as "the least-worst option" available. Our irrigation communities are rightfully proud of the contributions we have made to the Basin Plan under these projects, achieving real environmental outcomes, whilst maintaining the viability of our sector."

We cannot forget that this Four Corners program comes amidst a devastating drought, where most irrigation farmers in NSW simply do not have access to any water at all (0% general-security water allocation)."

The Facts

The Productivity Commission has said that the Basin Plan has already resulted in 20% of the water that was previously available for irrigation being returned to the environment.

These infrastructure projects actually require irrigation farmers to contribute their water to the Government before the project starts. These programs result in real water being returned to the environment. Proven by, the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture in its statement, “The On-Farm Irrigation Efficiency Program is returning 149 GL of water to the environment every year on average – through more than 1,500 on-farm projects”.

Further evidence from the Federal Department: “Six years into the 12-year Basin Plan we have already recovered around 2,100 gigalitres of water... More than 700 gigalitres of this water has been obtained from irrigation efficiency projects.”

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) confirmed this in a statement that more than 2000GL of water is now held for the environment.”

In the case of the Murrumbidgee, 262 billion litres of water are returned to the environment each year, whilst also maintaining the immense socio-economic value of the sector in this region.

4 Corners should have contacted the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) to check the facts of its story. The CEWH earlier attested that “as at 30 April 2019, the Commonwealth environmental water holdings [were a] total 2,815,133 megalitres of registered entitlements.”

MDBA – “The latest report finds that farmers are not taking more water than is allowed under the Basin Plan.”

The infrastructure programs do NOT increase the amount of water used by irrigation – in fact – they are part of a program of measures to decrease it.

On the cost of the programs: the MDBA said “While direct water purchase is cheaper than investing in irrigation infrastructure, research shows it causes more social and economic harm to regional communities.”

In a time of drought, this is even more important.

On the matter of buy backs or efficiency programs, the MDBA’s own ‘2017 Basin Plan Evaluation Southern Basin community profiles’¹ demonstrates that communities where significant buy-back occurred (such as Wakool in the NSW Murray Valley) have been significantly negatively impacted by the Basin Plan to the point of near total collapse. In comparison, other communities such as Griffith in the Murrumbidgee valley where water recovery has primarily occurred through efficiency measures, have continued to thrive.

On the suggestion of ‘return flows’, the Federal Department of Agriculture, said “Arguments about return flows diminishing savings have been thoroughly examined by the University of Melbourne and found to be vastly overstated.” An independent review by eminent hydrology experts found that “Projects in the Murrumbidgee contribute a large volume of

environmental recovery but have a low impact on return flow". The independent scientists from the University of Melbourne estimate that the loss from return flows is around 121GL per year (10% of the total recovery). The Basin Plan does take that into account.

On the matter of dams being built, Minister Littleproud rightly said, "Building a dam does not give a farmer more water entitlement" and "Planting almonds, nuts or any other water intensive crop does not give a farmer more water entitlement. Water entitlements are bought and sold on the open market".

Regarding access to these programs, Minister Littleproud has clarified, "Some 95 per cent of the On-Farm Irrigation Efficiency Program projects are worth less than \$1 million, with average project size of \$152,000 across the 1500 projects. These are almost all small projects involving small farmers, not big companies."

What about audits? The Federal Department of Agriculture has said "Our programs are also subject to a high level of scrutiny through internal and external audits. The department ensures that each project is subject to independent audits and also undertakes its own random audit of a sample of projects."

It should be remembered that infrastructure programs require irrigation farmers to hand water to the Government for environmental management before the project starts. The water register allows information on the amount of water transacted to the environment to be documented transparently. Projects funds are also administered by delivery partners – not the irrigation farmers.

We are pleased that the position of our members has been borne out by the facts presented above and supported by the relevant – Government establishments. Our members have also received strong endorsement of the industry and other rural communities for the projects which irrigation farmers have proudly been working towards achieving the environmental objectives of the Basin Plan. The NFF President that represents the bulk of the farming community emphasised the pivotal role the irrigation sector along with others play in sustaining rural jobs and viable communities.

For further information:
Luke Simpkins – CEO NSW Irrigators' Council
0410 976 919
Approved JC/TN

¹ <https://www.mdba.gov.au/publications/mdba-reports/southern-basin-community-profiles>