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MEDIA RELEASE

NSW Irrigators' Council supports the facts and a better Darling River as part of the Murray-Darling Basin

18/02/2019

Today's Australian Academy of Science report into fish deaths around Menindee really needed to cast their net wider. The 30 GL of Northern Basin inflows in the first six months of this financial year (less than 1% of average inflows according to WaterNSW) should have been considered in detail, along with visiting and talking with those they were ready to blame for so called 'over extraction'. There is no logic in blaming irrigation farmers who haven't farmed on the Barwon-Darling for almost two years because of the lack of water.

"The need for sufficient flows is no revelation and that is what everyone wants", Council CEO Luke Simpkins said. "We welcome the confirmation of the cause of how this tragic fish death occurred being because of depleted oxygen levels, but we refute the blame being laid at the feet of irrigation farmers."

Media and public statements around this tragedy have been far too influenced by political considerations. Claims of one million fish, and one-hundred-year-old Murray cod, that 'survived two world wars', are examples of emotive commentary that may send a video 'viral' but add nothing to the factual understanding of what happened and constructive discussions of what can be done for the future. In this case, the one hundred year old cod claims have not been repeated, but the discrepancy between NSW's report of hundreds of thousands and the Academy 'millions' continues this issue.

"What the Murray Darling Basin needs is more rain. That is the problem, not irrigation farmers," Mr Simpkins said. "Falsely apportioning blame to a small number of farmers achieves nothing except giving political activists someone to hate. What we always need is the end of the drought and more water, but the fact is that the existence of rural communities across the Murray-Darling Basin now depends on responsible leadership, they don't need political games, photo ops and viral videos.

"The report notes the lakes were full in 2016, which was the last time there were any meaningful rains and tributary flows in the north – and the last time northern irrigation farmers had access to any allocations of water.

The question as to whether too much water was released from the Menindee Lakes, why, when and what benefit it produced are legitimate questions.

Mr Simpkins said the Council was pleased to see the Academy of Science panel acknowledged there were opportunities for water savings in management and reconfiguration of the Lakes

(p34) but said any proposals and rule changes needed to be made in consultation with impacted stakeholders including water users. The NSWIC remains opposed to the cap being removed on water buy backs.

“NSWIC has always supported a review of the Menindee Lakes system to improve management and reduce evaporation but only on the condition that there is no negative impact on existing water licence holders,” he said.

“We agree with the panel that there is a lack of clarity around the current Menindee Lakes Water Savings Proposal and all decisions should be evidence based, in order to demonstrate to all stakeholders that they can have confidence that it will improve system management and not have negative impacts.

“Any proposal must also consider the social and economic impacts on the communities and industries that rely on both the Lakes and the Upper and Lower Darling River for their livelihoods.”

NSWIC believes that a consistent Socio-Economic Impact Assessment framework (SEIA) must be applied to all current and future water reforms, including the Menindee Lakes project, and reported through a Rural Communities Impact Statement, similar to the current requirements for Environmental Impact Assessments. ENDS

For further information:

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Approved JC/TN