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MEDIA RELEASE

No Time to Turn Back on Basin

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Today's announcement about trashing the December MinCo agreement on socio-economic criteria, from Federal Shadow Minister for Water Tony Burke and Labor's SA Shadow Minister for Industry Peter Malinauskas risks destroying industry support for the Murray Darling Basin Plan, according to the NSW Irrigators' Council.

In a joint announcement today, Tony Burke and his South Australian counterpart Peter Malinauskas announced Federal Labor would ignore the multi-state agreement on social and economic assessments to claw back more water for South Australia.

NSWIC Chief Executive Luke Simpkins said it was concerning for farmers and river communities throughout the Basin to see this sort of announcement. With the livelihoods of NSW and Victorian irrigation farmers hanging by a thread because of severe drought and reduced access to water over many years, this sort of manoeuvre undermines the increasingly fragile support for the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

"We must remember that the Basin Plan is a plan to restore the environment to health, and after years of negotiations we finally have the support of farmers and the agricultural industry who are participating in the Plan in good faith, despite severe negative impacts. That is an incredibly valuable collaboration. Why anyone would make such a move to risk losing the support of the very people who are vital for the implementation of the Plan, is ridiculous. Our farmers, and our environment, are not in a position to go backwards, and we must see our leaders making every effort for continued collaboration for the full implementation of the Plan to realise all objectives. "The Basin Plan is on track, water recovery is where it should be and there is still room to move under the existing cap on buyback. What we need is continued implementation to get the Plan in place. No plan can actually stop a drought occurring," he said.

"To date the Basin Plan has been a bi-partisan policy with both Labor and the Coalition committed to delivering the Plan 'in full and on time'.

“The introduction of the cap on buyback, which Mr Burke now wants to repeal, got through with bi-partisan support and the social and economic impact assessment has been negotiated and supported by all States, including Victoria’s Labor Minister,” Mr Simpkins said.

“Through all the devastating effects of the drought and no general security allocation of water to most farmers in NSW, South Australia continues to get everything that is in the Plan. There is no reason for South Australia to complain because their 1,850 Gigalitres still arrives. Therefore, any attempt to deliver more water to South Australia is a breaking of the Agreement. Attempts to take even more water from NSW and Victoria is an attack on jobs, on Australian food and fibre production, and above all, a plan to make ghost towns in rural NSW and Victoria’.

“Given this action, we ask the Shadow Minister how many jobs he is happy with being lost in his home State of NSW?”

Mr Simpkins said irrigation farmers and associated industries had been participating in the process to implement the Basin Plan in good faith for better environmental outcomes.

“The Basin Plan is here. The numbers do not work in the favour of irrigation farmers and there have been significant social and economic impacts in our communities, but it is well underway.

“We have got to a point where the blood-rush of early water recovery is over and we need to focus on the non-water parts of the Plan to see it through. When farmers across the Murray-Darling Basin are already stressed and struggling due to drought, the last thing they want to be doing is justifying their existence again.

“There is little doubt that weakened and desperate farmers will eventually sell under the Labor buyback changes, but does it make it right to prey on the vulnerable? If irrigation farmers in rural NSW and Victoria are going to be forgotten, a Federal Labor Government cannot rely on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan retaining any industry support,” Mr Simpkins said. ENDS

For further information:

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Approved JC/TN