

MEDIA RELEASE

Irrigation industry calls on Federal Government to buy 'A Class' Licences for Indigenous Nations

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The Natural Resources Commission (NRC) draft report reviewing the Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan recommended many measures already underway to improve water management in the region – whilst also opening the door to a new collaboration between farmers and Indigenous Nations.

NSW Irrigators' Council CEO Luke Simpkins said, "The NSWIC notes that the recommendations provided by NRC relate to areas already being actioned by Government, and well underway through the SAP (Stakeholder Advisory Panel) process."

"With the Barwon-Darling an area of close public scrutiny, measures to improve outcomes commenced years ago, and are now well under-way."

"Many of the measures recommended, such as strengthening metering and compliance, are areas industry has been proactively leading and are now well developed."

"We must remember that the Barwon-Darling remains on cease to flow conditions, meaning there are no diversions currently occurring, and there hasn't been for some time."

"The extent of diversions in the Barwon-Darling, according to published MDBA figures, is just 0.5% of all flows in the Basin, and less than 2% of total Basin diversions."

"Despite 94% of water reserved for the environment under the Water Sharing Plan¹, the largest hindrance to achieving any positive outcomes in the system is the fact that the water simply isn't there. A greater emphasis on the reality of the drought would have been a pleasing inclusion in the NRC's draft report. It's hard to manage water well, when there simply isn't water to manage."

"We all must appreciate that the combination of extensive water reforms and the worst drought on record (with less than 1% of typical flows entering the Murray-Darling Basin system) has had dire consequences".

¹ see Part 4, Clause 17, Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan

“In the Barwon-Darling, extensive droughts and reforms has taken over 1000 jobs in the past 20 years from the Bourke district. Many of these job losses from the farming sector have been from Indigenous communities, who are now facing substantial socio-economic decline.”

NSW Irrigators’ Council is now calling on Government to buy A Class Water Licences for Indigenous nations and establish the opportunity for ‘cultural flows’.

Spokesperson for the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN), Feli McHughes said “This initiative today from NSW Irrigators’ Council symbolises our collaboration between First Nations and the NSW Irrigation Farming community. We respect their support in collaborating to achieve shared outcomes of improving the social and economic conditions of our rural communities.”

“Over 30% of the Bourke population are Indigenous², and the irrigation industry have had a pivotal role in providing a source of employment for our people. Without water, irrigation farmers unfortunately no longer have the ability to support our communities. Despite that, we are pleased to see the irrigation industry continuing to support our people as best they can, by now using our long-standing relationship to help us secure our water rights.”

NSW Irrigators’ Council CEO continued, “A key recommendation from this review is the need to get a water allocation for Indigenous communities, and simplifying the licence categories and processes for Aboriginal water access. This is an area where we can work together to achieve improved outcomes for these communities.”

“The Federal Government has been looking to purchase A Class Licences from the Barwon-Darling, and we now have willing sellers who are prepared to sell their licences, but understandably, they want to see their water be used for a positive long-term outcome for their local area.”

“Water is the lifeblood of rural communities – you take out the water, and you take the community with it.”

NSW Irrigators’ Council provided a submission to inform this review, and will provide a further submission on the Draft Report.

BACKGROUND: Snapshot of Facts on the Barwon-Darling

- Irrigation farmers have less water than ever before, due to both the extensive drought, and the continued reforms which reduce the water available for farming.
- The extent of diversions in the Barwon-Darling, according to published MDBA figures, is just 0.5% of all flows in the Basin, and less than 2% of total Basin diversions.

²https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/LGA11150?opendocument

- Irrigation farming is well below cap levels - The cap limit of 189GL is under-utilised by irrigation farmers because the water simply isn't there. The current amount is 111GL, just 59% of the cap amount of 189GL.
- Under the WSP, 94% of water is reserved for the environment (see part 4, Clause 17 of the plan). The remaining 6% is made up of diversions for irrigation, town water supplies, stock & domestic use and industrial use.
- With the introduction of Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDL) for the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, the Barwon Darling SDL was set at the average annual long-term cap of 189GL (previously 523GL) less another 6GL local reduction under the Basin Plan. So far, the SDL reduction has been 32.6GL – more than 5 times the original reduction target.

For further information:

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