

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

Minister Pavey Taking Concerns of NSW Irrigation Farmers to Ministerial Council

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The NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC) was pleased to hear NSW Water Minister Melinda Pavey flagging her intention to raise many of the key NSWIC issues to the Ministerial Council meeting this Sunday.

NSWIC wrote to Minister Pavey in May regarding the gross inequity of obligations for NSW towns and farms to be wrung dry to fill the Lower Lakes in South Australia. The MDBA has said that in non-drought years the Northern Basin contributes 11% of the water NSW sends on to South Australia to fulfil the agreed 1,850 billion litres. There is no alteration to that 1,850 billion litres in drought years when the northern basin rivers do not contribute at all. Then the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers need to cover the shortfall. This results in irrigation farmers in southern NSW not getting any general security allocation and therefore struggling to make a living.

CEO of NSWIC Luke Simpkins said, "When there is just nothing coming into the top of the system, and towns at the top are actually running out of water and going dry, it is a gross injustice that the Lower Lakes at the end of the system are 96% full".¹

There has been less than 1% of typical inflows into the Basin system (according to WaterNSW).

"When NSW is facing the worst drought on record, but the Murray is at minor-flood level with drought-stricken farmers forced to watch the water flow by, you know there is something wrong."

The result of the crippling drought stretching across the upper Basin, is that every last drop has to be squeezed from the NSW Murray region in order to maintain flows across the South Australian border. This has resulted in farmers along the Murray being out of water too.

¹ See: <https://www.mdba.gov.au/managing-water/water-storage>

It is of utmost importance that South Australia receives its fair share of water for their communities, environment and farmers too, but under the current arrangements, the up river states are doing all the heavy lifting.

NSWIC is advocating that mechanisms are in place to share the strain of the drought fairly across the Basin.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Science confirms Lower Lakes were a salt-water system

The Basin Plan was developed on the understanding that the Lower Lakes were always freshwater. To keep them fresh, large volumes of water are now pushed through the delicate MDB river system from drought-stricken communities to keep those lakes full of freshwater. But now, peer-reviewed scientific reports² have emerged rejecting that basis, claiming they are in fact salt-water systems.

There's plenty of salt-water on the other side of the barrages, but there's really not much freshwater in the Murray-Darling Basin. What is left in the Basin, has an enormous way to travel to get to the Lower Lakes from drought-stricken NSW (where much will simply evaporate along the way).

This was a misinterpretation of the science. The Basin Plan is adaptive, meaning it is designed to be able to respond to new science as it emerges, and now we must call on Government to respond to this science, manage the Lower Lakes more appropriately, and take the strain off our distressed communities.

The impacts of pushing these volumes of water through the system, is that it is causing erosion of the riverbanks, and using water that could otherwise be used by farmers to achieve no real ecological outcome. In fact, it is fundamentally changing the ecology of the Lower Lakes. Furthermore, with the Murray River so full of water going downstream, there is limited capacity for water to be physically delivered to farmers even if a water allocation was made available.

It is a tragic insensitivity that one State chooses to take advantage of the good faith our farmers have shown in recovering water for the environment.

NSWIC congratulate Minister for responding to NSWIC calls to share the drought impacts across the Basin

We congratulate Minister Pavey for her statements in NSW Parliament on Wednesday this week:

² <https://www.mdba.gov.au/media/mr/mdba-statement-lower-lakes>

“I will bring to the ministerial council meeting the concern that all of our work will potentially result in the Lower Lakes going dry because we have not returned them to their natural state. We need to look at removing the barrages and ensuring that saltwater can return to where it once was. That is the commitment I will take to the ministerial council meeting.”

“At the other end of the system, almost 2,000 gigalitres is stored in the Lower Lakes—more than half of what we have to share between us in our upstream storages, which shows the lack of balance in our system because of this severe and terrible drought”.

“We need to adapt the Murray-Darling Basin Plan to ensure it responds to the needs of our communities in this once-in-a-lifetime drought.”³

For further information:

Luke Simpkins – CEO NSW Irrigators’ Council

0410 976 919

Approved JC/TN

³ See: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Hansard/Pages/HansardResult.aspx#/docid/HANSARD-1323879322-106404>