

MEDIA RELEASE

Reality check on Basin Plan at long last

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Today's commitment to no more buybacks is a long overdue but welcome political reality check, as is the acknowledgement that Basin Plan 2024 deadlines can't be met, and splitting the functions of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA).

"Basin communities who live along these rivers have known change is needed for a long time, and it is a relief to see decision-makers catching up," said NSW Irrigators' Council interim CEO Claire Miller.

"River communities as well as ecosystems need positive outcomes, and with 2100 gigalitres of water recovered from irrigated agriculture, now is the time to start working with, not against, communities.

Ms Miller said it had been obvious for years that more time and flexibility was needed to deliver the Sustainable Diversional Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) supply projects.

"The commitment to complementary measures shows a more genuine effort to improve ecosystem health, rather than the simplistic focus on flows alone.

"The Basin Plan was always intended to be adaptive, to respond to new knowledge and science. Changes are not a failure, but a necessary part of learning from doing, and doing things better.

"We are in a better position now to know how to best manage this precious resource without killing-off regional communities, than we were in 2012 when the Plan commenced."

Multiple reviews and inquiries stand behind today's announcements. Basin communities have been long frustrated by the political inaction despite these reviews showing the way forward.

"Today is the first time in a long time that decision-makers have shown themselves willing to listen to those findings and work with communities on innovative solutions that work for both people and the environment," Ms Miller said.

"More than 20% of water once used for farming is now dedicated to the environment.¹ That's in addition to the undiverted water that is more than 70% of river flows.

¹ The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) now has 2,875,939ML of registered entitlements, with a Long-Term Annual Average Yield (LTAAY) of 1,989,423ML. This now makes the CEWH the largest water holder in almost all Murray-Darling Basin valleys.

“While the Basin Plan is a massive achievement for sustainability, we cannot allow Canberra to sweep under the rug the pain of structural adjustment and adverse socioeconomic impacts borne by many irrigation-dependent communities.

“Communities have felt left out of managing their own backyard, and have been living under a constant threat of water insecurity from more buybacks. Looking after river environments and river communities is not mutually-exclusive.”

NSW Irrigators’ Council released a *Water Security Blueprint 2020-21* earlier this year, which included key components such as: no more water recovery from agriculture for the environment, investing in complementary measures to achieve better environmental outcomes, and calling for regional development support for communities impacted by water reforms.

Today’s announcements delivers on some of those objectives, but there is more left to do.