
MEDIA RELEASE

The switch for irrigation farming

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Irrigation in Australia is like a light switch – it turns on and off.

In the land “of droughts and flooding rains” as Dorothea Mackellar famously depicts, our farming systems have to fit into the boom or bust climate cycles of water availability.

During the devastating and harsh droughts, when rivers run dry and the landscape turns to dust, the light switch to irrigation is turned off. Farms sit dormant until the water returns.

But when the water does return, when floods emerge across the plains, when the landscape turns a lush green and wildlife returns, the light switch for irrigation farming can be turned back on.

It is important to understand this on-off nature of irrigation farming in Australia, for 2 reasons.

Firstly, the system of water management in NSW has evolved to match these cycles. Farmers are allocated a percentage of their water licence, based on how much water is currently in the system, and how much is forecast to be in the system in coming years. This means that in flood years, farmers may well get 100% of the volume of water they are licenced for, but in crippling dry years, they are restricted, even to as low as 0% of what they are actually licenced to take. Many farmers have just experienced 3 straight years of having 0 water allocations.

With water a precious and often scarce resource, it must be prioritised. In NSW, under legislation, critical human needs are first, followed by towns, the environment, and lastly, for food and fibre production. This means farmers only get the left-overs, if any, after the other higher priority needs are met. The severity of the most recent drought in NSW is evident when even the first-in-line for water (towns) were struggling as they approached ‘Day Zero’, and the environment and farmers were left dry.

Secondly, we need to understand the on-off nature of irrigation farming in Australia, because climate change is predicted to (and is already) extending the time the switch is ‘off’. Recent reports have found that 8 of the 13 driest years on record in the Murray-Darling Basin occurred in the last 20 years, most yielding zero or close to zero inflows. The impacts of climate change will affect all water users, as it progressively works up the order of priority, starting with the switching off of irrigation, but then, if there is insufficient supply, it will impact the environment, towns and people alike, as we are already seeing.

As water is now returning to the parched landscape, and La Nina is officially declared, irrigation farmers are getting ready to switch the lights back on, and once again be supplying Aussies with locally grown food and fibre.