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## MEDIA RELEASE

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# Ministers must find a Basin Plan circuit breaker

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Murray-Darling Basin ministers meeting this Friday must find a way to progress enhanced environmental outcomes without the threat of further buybacks hanging over communities.

“We need the States and the Commonwealth to act on multiple Murray-Darling Basin Plan reviews highlighting unrealistic deadlines and impending policy failure,” said NSW Irrigators’ Council (NSWIC) CEO, Claire Miller.

“The Basin Plan is supposed to be an adaptive management plan, but its rigid deadlines and prescriptive mechanisms make it impossible to adapt its implementation to new knowledge, science and experience since it was signed in 2012.

“We are fast approaching crunch time in 2024. Basin communities, farmers and the rivers deserve politics to be put aside, and sensible solutions agreed on to get better results than possible under the current Plan.”

Ms Miller described some decisions before the Basin Ministerial Council as ‘no-brainers’, given the many inquiries recommending the changes, and official agency reports ringing the alarm bells around proceeding with business as usual.

“It has been obvious for years that more time and flexibility is needed to deliver the Sustainable Diversional Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) supply projects,” Ms Miller said.

“More time and the capacity to introduce new projects will better achieve the Basin Plan’s triple bottom line goals. Basin governments say they want to rebuild trust. Well, that’s not possible with the threat of more buybacks hanging over communities because past governments agreed to unrealistic timeframes.

“This is not about putting projects into the never-never, but rather using extended time-frames to work in good faith with communities and landholders, not against them, to reach sensible milestones.

“If the supply projects can’t properly be delivered by 2024, then they can’t be delivered by 2024, and we need to start making the necessary adjustments to the Basin Plan now. We need to see bipartisan support in Federal Parliament for the necessary amendments to the Plan”

NSWIC is also calling on the Basin Ministerial Council to put an end to the culture of secrecy excluding stakeholders and Basin communities from policy development and research.

“The MDBA’s 2020 Basin Plan Evaluation going to the Ministerial Council this week is a case in point,” said Ms Miller. “The approach was conceived and undertaken behind closed doors with, we’re told, inputs from experts and service providers.

“Basin communities and industries already feel like the Basin Plan is something that is being done to them, not with them. Surely those on the frontline should be involved in evaluating the Plan’s success or otherwise, not just faceless consultants.

“Information sessions after the event do not constitute consultation.”

Similarly, NSWIC also hopes the Ministerial Council will be transparent on the options being considered to address deliverability shortfall risks and determine a pathway forward for community input.

“Delivery shortfall is a major concern. It goes beyond simply access to water when it’s needed, to the third-party impacts on other entitlement holders if major losses occur in delivering water, as well as potential environmental harm which must be avoided. It’s time we see stakeholder engagement in developing solutions.”

NSW has come a long way with water reforms, with major policy changes to metering and floodplain harvesting on the near horizon. Recent reports have found NSW far ahead of other states when it comes to compliance and metering. “We call on the other States to catch up.”