

MEDIA RELEASE

NSW irrigators 17% below Basin sustainable limits

06/08/2021

Water use by NSW Murray-Darling Basin irrigators was 17 per cent below the Basin Plan's Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDL) in 2019-20, according to the first Murray-Darling Basin-Authority SDL compliance report.

“This data quashes the populist narrative that irrigators are using too much water,” said NSWIC CEO, Claire Miller.

“Irrigators aren't even using all the water they are permitted to use under the Basin Plan.”

The valleys with the largest gaps between permitted and actual water take were spread right across NSW, including Lower-Darling (actual take 71% below permitted take), Gwydir (33% below), Murrumbidgee (31% below), Border Rivers (21% below) and NSW Murray (19% below).

Both the MDBA and NSW DPIE-Water have been clear the Barwon-Darling's apparent 29% increase was a technical modelling error, and not the result of over-extraction. NRAR has said Barwon-Darling irrigators did not take a drop more than they were legally entitled to, with multiple audits, inspections, investigations and routine surveillance since 2018.

“The model didn't take into account that the Government placed a total embargo on all water extraction in early 2020 – that's a massive omission,” said Ms Miller. “The model had also not been recalibrated to reflect data from new meters being rolled out.

“It is frustrating to see media highlighting a single negative modelling anomaly and ignoring the big picture where irrigators are using less water than permitted under the Basin Plan.”

Chronic underuse itself is an issue, however, as it indicates foregone production which means less income and jobs in regional economies.

“Underuse has been evident in MDBA Cap reporting since 2012. This again reinforces the need for the NSW Government to crack open the black box of water allocations,” said Ms Miller.

NSWIC believes chronic underuse is driven by cumulative policy drivers that are gradually eroding water entitlement reliability, and making it nearly impossible for irrigators to use water up to the Sustainable Diversion Limits. This in turn is driving conservative water use behaviour by irrigators, creating chronic underuse of the water available to grow food and fibre.

NSWIC is calling for the water allocation blackbox to be cracked open to better understand the impact of different policy drivers on allocations.