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## MEDIA RELEASE

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# No reason to further delay floodplain harvesting regulations

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Parliament must get on with the job and regulate floodplain harvesting after the NSW Upper House inquiry today failed to find any legitimate reason to further delay this important reform.

“Everyone agrees floodplain harvesting must be reduced, licensed and metered so that it complies with the Basin Plan and other limits on water use, just like every other form of water take,” said NSW Irrigators’ Council CEO, Claire Miller.

SA Royal Commissioner, Mr Bret Walker SC, told the inquiry that this reform was meant to be implemented by NSW 10 years ago. He said of the delays: *“How terrible, what a great shame and I do wish you would hurry up”* [full quote below].

“We agree,” said Ms Miller. “This reform has been years in the making and is long overdue.”

“More than \$56 million of Federal and State money has been spent on rigorous modelling, analysis and ground-truthing. Further, the licensing framework will be regularly reviewed to adjust water take as needed, reflecting variables including climate change.

“It is absurd the committee is now recommending spending millions more of taxpayers’ money setting up new processes to duplicate this work and delay this reform for even longer.”

Ms Miller said it was even more concerning that the committee wants NSW to go it alone on the Basin Plan with even lower sustainable diversion limits.

“They are backing groups who want to double the 2100 billion litres of water recovered from farmers across the Basin so far. That means shutting down family farms along with towns and communities in the Murray, Murrumbidgee and the northern valleys.”

Floodplain harvesting currently takes about three per cent of the annual average inflows in the northern Basin. This will be reduced to about two per cent if the regulations progress.

That amounts to irrigators losing another 100 billion litres of water to grow food and fibre, leaving that water in rivers and on floodplains for the environment. Importantly, the practice only occurs during floods when water is abundant and rivers are already running.

“NSW Irrigators’ Council, which represents more than 12,000 water users, is baffled by the proposition of further delays, particularly during the current La Nina,” said Ms Miller.

Key figures, including the head of the Natural Resources Access Regulator, were asked during the hearings whether Parliament disallowing the regulations had had negative environmental

outcomes and if more water would have remained on the floodplains if the regulations had progressed instead. The answer was – “yes” [full quote below].

While the report raises several perceived issues, technical experts and official agencies have investigated and found these issues to be based on misinformation and a poor understanding of the Basin Plan processes followed by all States.

The committee also appears to be confused about key responsibilities and processes, for example recommending NSW set up an independent panel to duplicate what the Murray-Darling Basin Authority already does in assessing all States’ compliance with Sustainable Diversion Limits.

Many findings and recommendations are also contradictory, for example, criticising governments for failing to regulate floodplain harvesting, but then recommending further delays before government can regulate it.

NSWIC has told the Parliamentary Committee that the industry accepts this reform because the industry supports all forms of water use complying with the limits and rules.

“We call on Parliament to hurry up and let the Government get on with it,” Ms Miller said.

## Quotes

**Mr WALKER:** Yes. You have got to pinch yourself to remember that it was in 2004 that by an intergovernmental agreement for the so-called national water initiative it was accepted that there needed to be, among other things, a close attention to floodplain harvesting. It was agreed in that that the States, including New South Wales, would implement such matters by 2011. That is 10 years ago. The things that were required to be implemented certainly included the recording, that is the study and description; the licensing, that is the regulation by control with limits; and a robust compliance and monitoring system, and none of that has happened. My comment is: How terrible, what a great shame and I do wish you would hurry up.

**The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY:** Do you think that more water would have gone to the environment if floodplain harvesting regulations had not been disallowed?

**Mr BARNES:** Yes.

Sources:

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/listofcommittees/Pages/committee-details.aspx?pk=274#tab-hearingsandtranscripts>