



Southern Riverina News

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REMOVE POLITICS

Irrigators deliver key messages to Productivity Commission

A whole of basin approach devoid of politics must be pursued if the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is to work, according to Southern Riverina Irrigators chair Gabrielle Coupland.

Mrs Coupland said open communication and the opportunity for input were key messages delivered to the Productivity Commission when it met with Basin Plan stakeholders in Deniliquin last Wednesday.

It was attended by irrigators, private irrigators, dairy farmers, local government representatives and other key stakeholders from across the region, including as far as Euroa.

The forum followed private meetings with Productivity Commission commissioner-environment Jane Doolan and assistant commissioner-water John Madden on Tuesday, one of which was organised by the Speak Up Campaign and included a wide range of stakeholders.

Issues raised included transparency, particularly in regards to environmental water," Mrs Coupland said.

"We need to understand what environmental assets they (the Murray Darling

Basin Authority) are trying to target and whether they are reaching the goals.

"Another talking point was the adjustment mechanism — the 605 gigalitres of offset water — and we highlighted that we wanted involvement in what projects would be included.

"With regards to environmental outcomes, the 605 gigalitres should be about basin outcomes and not South Australian outcomes.

"We also need monitoring and metering to be consistent across the basin."

Speak Up Campaign chair Shelley Scoullar said accepting local knowledge and admitting the failings of the Basin Plan publicly should be a key step in achieving positive outcomes for the remaining concerns.

"We raised concerns from locals who have long highlighted these issues with relevant authorities and governments, only for them to go full steam ahead despite the consequences," Mrs Scoullar said.

"We want the failings of the Basin Plan mentioned in reports along with the positives, because at the moment these failings are being ignored.

"That's what we see as a big weakness of the Basin Plan process and now we need open and honest monitoring and evaluations — that would be a good starting point."

While welcoming the Productivity Commission's review of the Basin Plan and its implementation, long-time district irrigator Neil Eagle said because of history there is scepticism it will inspire any change.

"I've been dealing with this for 20 years now — going to meetings and writing submissions, and being ignored," Mr Eagle said at the open meeting.

"(The Basin Plan is) looking at dismantling an irrigation system that has been built over 100 years and if we don't realise that, it will come and bite Australia soon.

"If you take water away we will lose our farms, our towns, our regions, as well as a massive amount of production.

"The Murray Darling Basin Authority originally estimated the Basin Plan would affect only 800 jobs. A report in the Wackool Shire — which is now merged with Murray Shire (to form Murray River Council) — has had half of its historical water taken out and

500 jobs have been lost from that small area alone.

"At the Lower Lakes (in South Australia) we see the equivalent of the capacity of Hume Dam pass through to the sea every year, and for no purpose.

"I want to know if something will come out of this (Productivity Commission meeting and report), or is it just another talk fest?"

Professor Doolan said the draft report based on the 14 consultation meetings across the basin and public submissions is expected to be completed in August, after which more submissions and consultation meetings would be sought.

She was adamant the process would be shaped by local input.

"We have a capacity to investigate, hear from people and make recommendation on areas where action can be taken on the implementation of the plan."

More information about the inquiry and how to make a submission can be found at <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/basin-plan#issues>.