

Commission told too much water is lost

By Alana Christensen

Farmers have demanded answers from the Productivity Commission as they clashed over the socio-economic impacts of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

The commission held public forums in Shepparton, Echuca and Deniliquin last week as part of a basin-wide inquiry into the effectiveness of the basin plan.

Water leaders, irrigators and community members were candid in their assessment of the impacts of the plan on the region, with Numurkah's Stuart Hipwell saying a drive through any country town was enough evidence of the impact on the region.

"You drive around the Murray Valley Irrigation area, and all you can see is battered earth, broken-down fences and sheds with corrugated iron blown off it — all because there's no water," Mr Hipwell said.

The former water bailiff said he could remember days when 150 000 Gl of water was delivered to the region, but times have changed.

"I'd hate to see what was being delivered up there now — basically nothing," he said.

"We haven't got a damn bucket of water to run down the channels and (governments) are not encouraging any development in the district irrigation areas but you're quite happy to rob them of their water."

State Member for Shepparton and Goulburn Murray Irrigation District Water Leadership Forum co-chair Suzanna Sheed said further water recovery was simply not an option.

"It simply should not happen under any circumstances," Ms Sheed said.

"We're at the tipping point right now and it's hard to see what we'd be left with (if the region had to recover a portion of the 450 Gl).

"To squeeze out that last drop now is just so unsustainable."

Although recent community profiles released by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority showed agricultural workforces in the region have dropped by as much as 47 per cent since 2001, there were accusations by some that the authority had attempted to explain away the statistics.

"They will say 'Oh, that's because of the commodity markets around the world', and this and that and the other," Ms Sheed said.

"They talk about things that farmers in this region have been dealing with all their lives, they're just part of doing business.

"They want to explain loss of jobs and things like that on day-to-day business factors rather than the fact there's been a massive change in the availability of water in the region."

Ms Sheed said it was time the authority's role got reviewed as it didn't make sense for the authority to both implement the plan while simultaneously being its own watchdog.

As the 605 Gl in Sustainable Diversion Limits prepares to go before Federal Parliament, calls for certainty and transparency have continued to grow, with Southern Riverina Irrigators chair Gabrielle Coupland calling for the focus to be on the crucial legislation.

While non-targeted recovery processes, constraints and adjustment mechanisms continue to be huge issues that need to be addressed, she said that ultimately, people were craving transparency from all levels of the system.

"People want to know what they use their water for, whether they're achieving their outcomes," Ms Coupland said.

"People have felt the pain, very tangible pain, and they want to know how the water is used."