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Media Release

Councils call for certainty for communities from the Basin Plan

Communities in northern Victoria, and across the Murray Darling Basin, need an end to the uncertainty around the Basin Plan.

With Water Ministers soon meeting for the first time since December, the Murray River Group of Councils is pressing for clear and decisive action that will prioritise certainty for the future of Basin Plan implementation.

"Now is the time that Water Ministers need to establish a clear path to deliver on the promise of a sustainable basin with a healthy environment and resilient, prosperous communities" said Cr Bill Moar, Chair of the Murray River Group of Councils.

The Murray River Group, which represents communities across northern Victoria, is calling on the Ministerial Council to face the difficult decisions around timing and funding to get the Plan right.

The Group is asking Ministers to focus efforts on tackling the parts of the Basin Plan that are behind schedule; such as the supply projects to deliver 605GL worth of environmental benefits and constraints management that is critical to enabling environmental water to be delivered to where it is required.

"These projects are really important to that balance that we keep on hearing about," said Cr Moar. "If they aren't delivered, then more water will have to be recovered from agriculture to restore the health of the Basin's ecosystems. Doing that will cause more damage to our communities and put more pressure on our farmers, so let's deliver the 605GL, even if they take a bit more time, or there have to be new projects."

The Group is also concerned at recent applications to the Commonwealth Water Efficiency Program that on the face of it are at odds with the socio-economic neutrality criteria agreed by all Basin governments in December 2018.

"The uncertainty in our communities about the 450GL is a real worry" Cr Moar said. "It hangs over their heads a bit. Lisa Neville and MinCo worked hard and listened and agreed the socio-economic criteria and we thought that had clarified it. Only now we are seeing proposals that really aren't water saving projects. We want Ministers to be really clear about their commitment to the neutrality principles and then tell their departments to adhere to them please"



"We really support our Water Minister, Lisa Neville on this. She is standing up again and calling out what is unacceptable. Ministers agreed these criteria and everyone needs to stick to them' said Cr Moar.

The Group also expressed its support for Minister Neville on the issue of deliverability and the risks of increased extraction licences in the Murray downstream of the Barmah Choke to the environment and to existing water entitlement holders.

MRGC called on Ministers to urgently implement a consistent mechanism for issuing new extraction licences that will not adversely affect existing entitlement holders.

Other areas where the MRGC councils are seeking better outcomes for their communities include improved transparency and accountability for environmental watering, as well as reform of the water market to improve transparency and consistency.

"Our communities value the environment and they need to know that environmental water – the water they have given up – is being used as effectively as possible and is being measured and monitored and that we are getting good outcomes for it" Cr Moar said.

"They also are very concerned about the water market. We really look forward to what the ACCC is going to say on markets. We need them to make recommendations that will, as far as possible eliminate speculative trading that just pushes up water prices.

While the Murray River Group acknowledged that the impacts of water reform had been varied across the region, there was concern that the policies and investment designed to offset the negative impacts of the Basin Plan had been ineffective.

The Group is calling for co-ordinated policy and additional investment to preserve and enhance northern Victoria's capacity to grow food and fibre and to promote entrepreneurialism to support new business growth across the region.

The Murray River Group of Councils comprises six councils in northern Victoria, Mildura and Swan Hill Rural City Councils and Loddon, Gannawarra, Campaspe and Moira Shires.

ENDS

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