

## **MURRAY RIVER GROUP OF COUNCILS ACTING CHAIR SAYS PASSING OF WATER AMENDMENT BILL BITTER-SWEET FOR BASIN COMMUNITIES**

Murray River Group of Councils Acting Chair Cr Tony Marwood said last week's passing of the *Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Bill 2023* by the Australian Government was a 'bitter-sweet outcome' for Basin communities.

"Although I'm disappointed that water buybacks remained in the Bill and the cap on buybacks was removed, there were some concessions for our communities as a result of amendments introduced by Senator David Van," Cr Marwood said.

"For instance, the inclusion of water leasing options for water recovery by the Commonwealth will give irrigation farmers more flexibility in deciding what best suits their operational needs and personal circumstances."

Farmers will have the choice of whether to sell their water entitlement (buybacks), lease water to the Commonwealth, or sell their entitlement and lease it back from the Commonwealth (leasebacks).

"While these leasing options will give farmers some choice, we believe that any water recovery efforts should be focused on the Northern Basin in the first instance.

"The Basin Plan 2020 evaluation assessment of outcomes found hydrology and ecology to be stable or improved in the Southern Basin but had declined in the Northern Basin due to a drying climate and lack of held environmental water. So, we urge the Commonwealth to concentrate on lifting the health status of the environment in the Northern Basin as the first priority."

As part of its #PushbackBuybacks campaign, the MRGC fought hard to retain the socio-economic impact test which the original Bill had removed. The updated Bill makes provision for a socio-economic factor.

"The Bill's passing with an amendment that requires the government to conduct socio-economic impact assessments of any water purchase program and that these must be reported on annually, aligns with our position.

"However, it is critical that the socio-economic impact assessment process is thorough and robust, including consulting with stakeholders, to enable a comprehensive evaluation of any water purchase program and detailed reporting to the public.

"Moving forward, if water buybacks do occur across the Basin, we hope that there is genuine and deep engagement between the Australian Government and Basin communities on compensatory adjustment packages, and that local councils are an integral part of this process as we know our communities best.

"We also urge the government to ensure that any compensation happens in a timely manner and that the process does not pit one community against another.

"In the meantime, we will continue to strongly advocate on behalf of our communities to facilitate their long-term social vibrancy and economic prosperity."

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## About the Murray River Group of Councils

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



LGA	POPULATION 2021	LGA	AREA (Km2)
Mildura	56,972	Mildura	22,083
Campaspe	38,735	Loddon	6,696
Moira	30,522	Swan Hill	6,115
Swan Hill	21,403	Campaspe	4,519
Gannawarra	10,638	Moira	4,047
Loddon	7,759	Gannawarra	3,735

Water is the lifeblood of our communities.

Agricultural commodities in the MRGC region have combined a value in excess of \$4 billion. Together, the agriculture and food manufacturing sectors account for, a third of all economic output, 43% of all local expenditure and one in four jobs in our region. Around half of all farm businesses in our region rely on irrigation.

The rivers, floodplains, lakes and wetlands of northern Victoria have enormous environmental value and are fundamental to our regional identity. Our region is home to four Ramsar wetlands: Hattah-Kulkyne, Kerang Wetlands, Gunbower and Barmah.

Our communities depend on a healthy Murray River system for drinking water and for recreation. Our tourism industry relies in large part on a healthy Murray River system as the single main attraction for the region.

All these depend on the careful management of the Murray Darling Basin water resources in partnership with Basin communities.