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Media Release

MURRAY RIVER GROUP OF COUNCILS LAUNCHES CAMPAIGN TO KEEP AUSTRALIAN-GROWN PRODUCE ON OUR TABLES

The Murray River Group of Councils (MRGC), comprised of six councils in northern Victoria, today launched its **#PushbackBuybacks campaign** aimed at keeping local and affordable Australian-grown food on our tables by stopping the *Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Bill 2023* from becoming law.

MRGC Chair Cr Rob Amos said the Bill proposes changes to the Murray Darling Basin Plan that would reinstate water buybacks from farmers, putting livelihoods and communities at risk, and adding to cost-of-living pressures on Australian households.

"Extensive research and our collective experience tell us that water buybacks have dire socio-economic consequences," Cr Amos said. "Last time, they caused the loss of 1,600 jobs, the closure of a milk factory and increased farming risk across our region.

"Our communities are only just getting back on their feet after the pandemic, fires and floods. The reintroduction of water buybacks would seal the fate of our vulnerable agricultural industries and further decimate our fragile regional communities.

"The proposed changes would also put at risk one of the nation's largest food bowls.

"The fresh produce Australian families love, from farm-fresh milk and cheese to all kinds of fruit and vegetables, are mostly grown along the Murray River and its tributaries.

"It's vitally important that we protect our food-growing areas and the right of all Australians to have access to affordable fresh Australian-grown produce.

"That's why we're encouraging all Australians to join us in sending a strong message to the Australian Government by signing the **#PushbackBuybacks petition** to keep Australian-grown food on the tables of Australian families."

Agricultural production, food processing and associated businesses drive northern Victorian economies. Together, the agriculture and food processing sectors account for one third of all economic output, 43% of all local expenditure and one in four jobs.



Previous water buybacks increased the cost of water for irrigators, pushing up input costs, including labour and shared infrastructure. This caused a raft of negative flow-on impacts, including:

- \$500 million of lost productivity across the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District (GMID) each year
- undermining the viability of irrigation districts, with 50% less water used in the GMID in recent years
- irrigation job losses of over 40% in northern Victoria
- directly increased water market prices, ABARES estimates on average by \$72/ML.

"If the Bill goes through, there will be more pressure on the weekly shopping bill of Australian families," Cr Amos said.

"The domino effect of reduced water and rising input costs are less dairy and meat production, and less availability of fresh fruit and vegetables. This, in turn, drives up the price of fresh produce and packaged food products at the checkout."

The MRGC supports the environmental outcomes the Australian Government aims to achieve through the Basin Plan but believes there are better alternatives to buybacks, such as the water-saving and efficiency projects underway at Hattah Lakes and Gunbower Forest as part of the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project.

"We have put the research and the concerns of our communities to the Australian Government many times over the last decade, including as recently as May this year when we met with the Minister for Environment and Water Tanya Plibersek. Unfortunately, our pleas to consider the triple bottom line of social, economic and environmental impacts, instead of single-mindedly focusing on water targets only, continue to be disregarded.

"In fact, one of the proposed changes of this government Bill is to remove the socio-economic impact test of the Basin Plan implementation. This goes to the heart of why these changes should not proceed. The removal of any safeguards cuts to the core of our community values and is contrary to the wellbeing of our communities.

"It's now time to put politics aside and all levels of government to work together towards achieving the environmental outcomes to which we all aspire, while also applying a human lens in understanding the broader ramifications of water buybacks on our businesses, industries, families and communities."

For more information and to sign the petition, visit
<http://www.mrgc.com.au/pushbackbuybacks/>.

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

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.