

## **MURRAY RIVER GROUP OF COUNCILS CONVEYS ITS CONCERNS ON WATER BUYBACKS TO MURRAY DARLING BASIN AUTHORITY**

Murray River Group of Councils (MRGC) Chair Cr Rob Amos has urged the Murray Darling Basin Authority to keep the social and economic wellbeing of northern Victorian communities at its heart when advising the Australian Government on water buybacks as part of the upcoming *Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Bill 2023*.

Basin Authority Chair Sir Angus Houston and his colleagues met MRGC representatives in Echuca on Wednesday, 15 November to discuss the MRGC's concerns about the significant socio-economic impacts water buybacks would cause if reintroduced.

Independent research and previous research show water buybacks have caused a raft of negative impacts, including \$500 million of lost productivity across the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District each year, the loss of 1,600 jobs across the MRGC region and business closure.

"If the upcoming Water Amendment Bill is passed into legislation it would be a shortsighted and lopsided policy decision by the Australian Government," Cr Amos said.

"The bill's proposal to reintroduce water buybacks from irrigation farmers may give short-term environmental gain to the government but will result in long-term socio-economic pain for our farmers, industries and communities.

"The bill's removal of the socio-economic impact test is also deeply concerning to us.

"The government needs to understand the broader ramifications of water buybacks, such as contributing to the breakdown of the social fabric of communities by impacting the viability of local businesses, schools, sports clubs and community facilities. We saw this last time when buybacks led to a 28% decrease in milk production and this contributed to the closure of a milk processing plant. We can't let that happen again!

"Water buybacks would also put at risk a significant portion of Australia's largest food bowl and add further pressure to Australia's cost-of-living crisis.



"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. Furthermore, 78% of milk production in the Murray Darling Basin is in northern Victoria.

"Buybacks are known to increase the price of water for farmers. So, when production input costs go up, this will ultimately be reflected in the price of fresh produce and food products at the checkout.

"Australia needs a water policy backed by big picture strategic thinking underpinned by careful consideration of the triple bottom line of social, economic and environmental impacts. However, what we'll potentially have if this bill passes in its current form is a water policy that focuses on the environmental lens only.

"We acknowledge that the Murray Darling Basin Authority is not a policy-making body. However, we hope that by reiterating our deep concerns, the Authority will have a more holistic understanding of the negative impacts buybacks will have on our communities and can advise the government accordingly."

The MRGC also highlighted the speed at which the bill is being rushed through the Senate and is urging the Australian Government to slow down the process.

"These sorts of policy decisions shouldn't be made in a hurry in 'the Canberra bubble'," Cr Amos said.

"While we appreciate the Basin Authority is taking the time to hear the concerns of communities as part of their current visitation program, it's also vitally important that all parliamentarians take the time to fully understand the insights and experiences of farmers, workers, industry leaders and other community members who have been impacted by water buybacks in the past."

In thanking the Basin Authority contingent for their visit, Cr Amos encouraged them to continue to consult with people at the grassroots level and take advantage of local councils who are in a unique position to facilitate the community consultation process.

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.