



MEDIA RELEASE

Councils call for Basin Plan rethink

Wednesday 3 July 2024

Northern Victorian Mayors are calling on the Albanese Government to put communities at the heart of the remaining implementation of the Basin Plan and to reject open tender buy backs.

Mayors from the Murray River Group of Councils in northern Victoria spoke at Parliament House in Canberra today to urge the Commonwealth to urgently rethink its approach to the Basin Plan.

The rush to recover water through open tender buy backs regardless of the impact on communities was a key concern of Councils along with the grossly inadequate "compensation" figure offered to communities in return for the socio-economic harm that open tender buy backs would bring.

Speaking today in Canberra where Local Councils from around Australia are meeting, the Chair of the Murray River Group of Councils, Cr Ross Stanton warned that buying back water through one on one deals from anywhere across the southern Basin, without a strategic plan developed with communities, would be the worst outcome for all Australians.

"Open tender buy backs will have serious negative social impacts on our communities.

"They will have serious negative economic impacts on our businesses and our towns.

"Worst of all, they will not restore our region's rivers or our valued floodplain ecosystems."

"When market forces alone determine how much and where water is recovered, it actually makes achieving environmental outcomes harder. This is because it concentrates environmental water in dams upstream and it's more difficult to deliver to the ecosystems that need it" Cr Stanton said.



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"There is a better way. Our councils believe that Basin communities must be at the heart of the delivery of the Basin Plan.

"We know that more water will be recovered and that will have impacts but, if it is managed in a strategic way, developed with and supported by Basin communities, that is going to deliver far better outcomes" Cr Stanton said.

"We are here in Canberra for the Association of Local Government conference and we will be supporting a motion to the National General Assembly this afternoon calling for a rethink of this Government's Basin Plan approach.

"Rethink open tender buy backs, put communities at the heart of any water recovery and be serious about helping communities transition.

Cr Stanton also pointed to the economic costs of open tender buy backs and their impact on jobs. The Commonwealth's recent ABARES report forecast an annual reduction in farm gate production in the southern Basin of \$111m per year.

"The last time the Commonwealth did an open tender water buy backs in our region, we lost around 1600 jobs, it cost us hundreds of millions of dollars in production, and the price of water for agriculture went up by \$72 per megalitre.

"Our irrigation districts ended up looking like Swiss cheese. They are delivering about 50% less water over the same sized area – that has driven up the costs for all the remaining irrigators. If that happens again, it will push districts to breaking point" said Cr Stanton.

"It's not just our communities either. This is going to have an effect on prices in supermarkets, on exports, it will affect GDP, all at a time when cost of living is an issue for everyone.

"We all want healthy rivers, and a thriving environment, none more than those of us who live in it in our river communities.

"We also need thriving towns and businesses and relying on market forces and focusing purely on water recovery as a number through open tender buy backs will cause social and economic damage" Cr Stanton said.

Mayors pointed to the Victorian Government's prospectus as an example of a different approach that would properly involve communities in planning the changes that would better deliver environmental outcomes and protect the livelihood of northern Victorian towns.

The Commonwealth has recently provided more detail about its Community Adjustment Assistance fund which will be \$300 million over four years across the entire Basin.



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"This is woefully inadequate. It wouldn't even simply offset the economic damage that will be done to our region through open tender buy back water recovery" said Cr Stanton.

"We would welcome a serious conversation with the Commonwealth Government about investing in our region, but a bit of a sugar hit, which is what this "compensation" amounts to, won't create jobs, won't stop food prices rising and won't help communities thrive.

"We urge Minister Plibersek and the whole Albanese government to respect regional communities and work with us to deliver genuine and lasting environmental outcomes, and a sustainable irrigation future for northern Victoria" Cr Stanton said.

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Mayors from the Murray River Group of Councils in Victoria supported by local members at Parliament House today

L to R above: Cr Rob Amos, Mayor of Campaspe Shire; Sam Birrell MP, Member for Nichols; Geoff Rollinson, CEO, Gannawarra Shire; Dr Anne Webster MP, Member for Mallee; Cr Liam Wood, Mayor of Mildura Rural City Council; Senator Perin Davey; Cr Stuart King, Mayor Swan Hill Rural City Council, Cr Mark Eckel Mildura Rural City Council; Suzanna Sheed, Administrator, Moira Shire, Cr Ross Stanton, Chair Murray River Group of Councils, Mayor Gannawarra Shire; Matthew Morgan CEO Moira Shire.



Cr Rob Amos speaking to the media with MRGC colleagues and local members at Parliament House earlier today.



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