



Water cuts still too severe under new Basin plan

Queensland farm group AgForce believes the Draft Murray Darling Basin plan released today has a long way to go before being accepted by Queensland irrigators.

AgForce water spokesman Kim Bremner said the plan proposes cuts to the amount of water farmers can take from the Condamine-Balonne, Moonie and Border Rivers systems in southern Queensland, but allows seven years for those cuts to take place.

“The Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) in this draft plan are still too low, but we are pleased it allows the government until 2019 to buyback water and prescribes a review in 2015 where further refinements can take place,” Mr Bremner said.

“We’ve just endured 10 years of rigorous water planning processes with the State government to come up with a Queensland plan that we maintain is environmentally sustainable so we still question why more water needs to be taken from irrigators.”

Under this draft there is still a sizeable volume of water to be clawed back from Queensland rivers - 117 gigalitres in first round “in-stream” cuts, and up to 100 gigalitres in second-round “downstream” cuts (see background information below).

“We question how the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) arrived at these SDLs but we believe with further work within the ‘localism framework’ we can achieve an outcome acceptable to the community and irrigators,” Mr Bremner said.

The Queensland farming communities most affected by the proposed water cutbacks will be St George and Dirranbandi (the Balonne River) and Goondiwindi (Border River system).

“Let’s be clear that any buyback to water entitlements *will* result in lower agricultural production which is why we want to be sure the MDBA process is based on solid science and avoids unnecessary impacts on farm businesses and rural communities.”

AgForce is disappointed with speculation that Queensland isn’t doing its fair share to restore the health of the Murray Darling system.

“Our take of water from the Basin has always been sustainable. Queensland has had a moratorium on new dams since 2000 and no new licences have been issued since 1994 and it also has to be remembered our development of water infrastructure has been well behind other states,” Mr Bremner said.

“The reason Queensland SDLs have changed from the original Guide is because the MDBA has acknowledged our already stringent water planning processes and appear to have corrected mistakes made in the Draft Guide.”

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Background

The Murray Darling Basin is one of Australia's largest drainage divisions covering approximately 1 million square kilometres across four Australian states - Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia as well as the Australian Capital Territory.

After a decade of drought and in recognition of the poor health of the southern sections of the system particularly, the 2007 Federal Water Act handed power to manage rivers in the Murray Darling Basin to the Commonwealth government, rather than individual management by the States.

The Federal government released its controversial "Guide to the Draft Murray Darling Basin Plan" in October 2010. The plan proposed cuts to total water extractions from the Basin of between 3000 and 4000 gigalitres across four states.

Despite Queensland's water extractions from the Basin representing only 1.5% of total extractions, farmers in the northern section of the system, including Queensland producers, faced cuts of up to 40% of their irrigation water under the Draft Guide.

Following outrage from farm groups and irrigation communities, and recognition from the Commonwealth government that the social and economic impacts of the cuts had not been properly considered, the Guide was scrapped and a new planning process launched under current MDBA chair Craig Knowles.

The new Draft Plan was released today although details have already been leaked to stakeholders and the media.

The new plan

Rather than setting on overall amount of water to be recovered from irrigators in each catchment, the new Plan proposes water be clawed back in two phases – "in stream" and downstream SDLs (Sustainable Diversion Limits).

In stream SDL - the volume of water required to be returned to the environment *within* a catchment, to be recovered by 2015. Local irrigation communities have to 'find' this amount of water from current entitlements. The Plan proposes first round "in-stream" cuts of 100 gigalitres from the Condamine-Balonne system and 15 gigalitres from the Border Rivers.

Downstream SDL – the volume of water needed to flow downstream to meet the environmental needs of the entire Murray Darling system. The downstream component has been split into a Northern Basin and Southern Basin Shared Zone, with the Northern Zone estimate expected to be around 143 gigalitres. However, the split of this downstream component between the Northern catchments (Border Rivers QLD and NSW; Gwydir, Namoi, Moonie and Condamine-Balonne) will not be known until the 2015 review.