

NSW IRRIGATORS CAUTIOUSLY WELCOME NEW MDBA CHAIR

NSW Irrigators Council has cautiously welcomed the Federal Government's announcement of ex Speaker of the House of Representatives, Neil Andrew, as the new Chairman of the Murray Darling Basin Authority.

Council CEO, Mark McKenzie, said that while Mr Andrew has a long history in Parliament, with rural industry and in irrigated horticulture in the Riverland of South Australia, the true litmus test of his effectiveness will be how he relates to irrigation communities across the four States through which the Murray Darling Basin is spread, and how he manages a Basin Authority that continues to be driven primarily by environmental outcomes based on computer modelling and not on practical experience of how water can be best deployed in the Basin to meet the Plan objectives, while minimising impacts on irrigators and their communities.

"Many people know Neil Andrew as an experienced political hand and a 'good bloke', but we earnestly hope he will leave the attitude of many of his fellow South Australians and their obsession with the Lower Lakes, Coorong and the Murray Mouth at the door when he becomes MDBA Chair. He must relate to and understand the perspective of irrigators across the whole Basin and not just the environmental lobby and those in South Australia, including that State's Water Minister, calling for more and more water to be sourced from upstream to feed the Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth. His first task should be to travel the Basin and find out for himself the very heavy economic toll the Basin Plan has already dealt on irrigated agriculture and many rural communities in NSW, Queensland and Victoria."

Mr McKenzie said NSWIC would seek an early meeting with Mr Andrew to express a number of its concerns around the implementation of the Basin Plan, including the MDBA's Constraints Management Strategy, progress towards a comprehensive evaluation of the social and economic impact of the Plan on regional communities, the Northern Basin Review, evaluation of environmental watering strategies, and the future form and functions of the Authority once the Plan is implemented in 2019.

NSWIC has been a critic of the MDBA's lack of focus on the impact of the Plan and water buybacks on regional communities and irrigators, which ignores the triple-bottom-line impact assessment required of the Authority by the Water Act. The Council has also recently expressed concern that the MDBA is recommending to State and Federal Water Ministers that they approve moving to full feasibility of its Constraints Management Strategy designed to move even greater volumes of water down the system to South Australia, when it is still unclear whether it is possible to successfully deliver the 2750GL of water being returned to the environment under the Plan - without significant negative impacts on communities and landholders.

"NSWIC believes that while the MDBA has improved its communications with irrigation bodies, there is still a predominant view amongst NSW irrigators that the Authority is not paying attention to local knowledge of the rivers, wetlands and floodplains in its environmental watering and river management strategies, and is too driven by theoretical modelling that often is at odds with reality. This is causing mistrust of the Authority. We trust that Neil Andrew will ensure that the Authority really does take notice when regional irrigators and communities raise concerns about the 3rd party impacts of trying to engineer flood level flows," Mr McKenzie said.

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