

## Slipping away: NSW Murray and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan

NSW Murray is a rich, diverse food bowl, stretching 1400km along the Murray River from Khancoban in the east to Wentworth on the SA border. It is home to 114,000 people living in 10 local government areas covering 87,738 km<sup>2</sup>.

At its heart is the 740,000-hectare Murray Irrigation Ltd (MIL) district. Irrigated rice and other crops, horticulture and dairy are the economic backbone of MIL communities, supporting thousands of jobs on-farm, in processing and service industries. Irrigation underpins town water security in Deniliquin, Berrigan, Finley, Wakool and Bunnaloo.



### NSW Environmental entitlements\*

	NSW (OEH)	MDBA: Living Murray	CEWH	Total GL
High Security	2 GL	5.6	21	28.6
General Security	20GL	120	391	531
Regulated Conveyance			20	20
Supplementary		350		350
Unregulated		13		13
<b>Total GL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>488.6</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>942.6</b>

\* Most environmental entitlements were purchased from irrigators through buybacks and on-farm upgrade programs under the Basin Plan. Water savings from off-farm projects, such as the Commonwealth's Private Irrigation Infrastructure Operator Program (PIIOP) in the MIL, were converted into environmental entitlements.

### Water is this region's lifeline, and it's slipping away

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan has so far cut the water for growing food and fibre by about 20 per cent. This water recovery for the environment has left a lasting legacy of reduced production, lost jobs and hardship in NSW Murray towns and communities.

Murray Irrigation Limited (MIL), the Basin's largest irrigation infrastructure operator, holds around 450 GL (28 per cent) fewer entitlements than it did in 1995 as a result of all environmental recovery programs to date, including 260 GL from the Basin Plan alone. This represents a reduction of almost \$2.5 million a year in sales revenue (user charges), putting upward pressure on prices for irrigators.

### Industries and communities are on the brink

Various reports all point the same way: the Basin Plan is having substantial negative socio-economic effects on some communities, the impacts are unevenly spread, and further recovery may cause additional hardship.

The Murray Darling Basin Authority's own assessment of socio-economic indices for areas (SEIFA) in the southern Basin showed marked declines in all major NSW Murray towns, a negative trend shared by few other southern Basin communities. This clearly shows NSW Murray has not had time to adjust to the rate of water recovery.

About one in three jobs in the MIL footprint are on-farm or in agricultural manufacturing. Around 450 FTE farming sector jobs were lost after buybacks linked to the Basin Plan and despite the Millennium Drought breaking the farming sector decline was proportionately and significantly higher than job losses in other sectors.

Major companies such as SunRice are warning that the loss of critical production mass is undermining their competitiveness in international markets. More jobs and skills will be lost to the region if irrigated industries lose critical mass, tip over the edge and close.

### No more water from irrigators

Recovering another 450 GL of 'upwater' from irrigators in the southern Basin will tip our region over the brink. The Basin ministerial council must broaden the socio-economic impact test when it meets on 14 December.

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## The Murray-Darling Basin Plan at a glance

The \$13 billion 2012 Basin Plan requires 2750 billion litres (GL) to be recovered to improve river health. Water is purchased from irrigators through buybacks and farm upgrades, saved from off-farm water-efficiency projects, and substituted with environmental 'offset' projects to get similar outcomes using less water.

As of 30 September 2018, 2118 GL was recovered or contracted. Basin States are committed to find the equivalent of another 605 GL in offset projects by 2024.

**This means the 2750 GL Basin Plan is all but achieved.**



### The 450 GL 'upwater'

The Gillard Government legislated that up to an additional 450 GL could be recovered, to create a 3200GL plan. However, it is conditional on neutral or positive impacts for participants in the Murray-Darling Basin Water Infrastructure (MDBWI) Program.

But the Basin Plan 'neutrality' test takes no account of the third-party or water market impacts. Basin ministers have committed to broaden the test to protect communities when they meet on 14 December 2018.

### We are concerned negative environmental impacts are not being reported along with the successes

#### Positives include:

- Improved native fish and bird breeding success, including in the Coorong.
- Significant increases in waterbird species diversity and total abundance in some sites.
- Revegetation stabilising Goulburn River banks.
- Improved dissolved oxygen and black water mitigation

#### Negatives include:

- Carp breeding proliferation
- Bank erosion and slumping from high flows
- Farms previously vibrant with birdlife and wildlife are now barren
- Kerang Ibis rookery was the largest in the world, but is now collapsing
- Hypoxic black water events

**Monitoring of all positive and negative environmental impacts is required before any further water recovery.**

### What would the 450GL 'upwater' do for the lower lakes, Coorong and Murray mouth?

A 2012 MDBA study<sup>1</sup> indicates recovering another 450GL from irrigators will make little or no difference in water levels and water quality in the lower lakes and the Coorong, or the frequency and depth of an open Murray mouth.

The 450GL 'upwater' **may** make a material difference in the lower lakes, Coorong and Murray mouth but only if it is all sent downstream, bypassing high-conservation sites upstream such as the Chowilla complex near Renmark and running the Murray River at unnaturally high levels for prolonged periods.

### Let's demonstrate that the 2750GL can be delivered before recovering the 450GL



The additional 450GL could increase flows to the SA border to 80,000GL a day, and **may** provide benefit to wetlands between the Darling River and Lock 1.

However, the model assumes all regulatory, physical, environmental and socio-economic constraints in the Murray River system are relaxed, such as creating flood easements on affected properties and upgrading dams, roads, bridges and other infrastructure to cope with high and more frequent river flows.

The Productivity Commission has warned overcoming these constraints will take many years, if even possible. Works will substantially exceed the Commonwealth funds set aside to become a further burden, unnecessarily, on the taxpayer.

### Saving the Coorong

The Coorong's southern lagoon depends on freshwater flowing in from creeks, aquifers and wetlands that used to cover 40% of south-east South Australia. More than 90% of the wetlands were drained decades ago for farming and other purposes, with the freshwater now diverted direct into the Southern Ocean down large artificial drains.

More water down the Murray River will not make much difference to the southern lagoon's declining health. What it really needs is the freshwater from the south east now draining out to sea returned.

<sup>1</sup> "Hydrologic modelling of the relaxation of operational constraints in the southern connected system: Methods and results". October 2012, MDBA.