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Enough reports, now it's time for action

Hello! Is anyone there? Can you hear us? Are you listening?

The community-based Speak Up Campaign is hoping, at long last, that someone might 'listen' following the release of yet another damning report into the impacts of the failing Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

The draft report providing an independent assessment of social and economic conditions in the Basin was released on Monday, March 16.

In the foreword, panel chair Robbie Sefton paints a bleak picture of the Basin Plan's impact on rural communities.

She says "visions and policies ... have not dealt fairly with those left behind, nor worked hard enough to be fully inclusive", adding "the panel has seen first-hand the uneven impact of this lack of shared vision".

"We see it as vital that governments adjust their approach," Ms Sefton reports.

Speak Up chair Shelley Scoullar said disengaged communities are wondering how many reports will it take for governments to accept that the Basin Plan is failing and must be fixed.

Ms Sefton also stated: "They (governments) need to give more attention to the uneven and indirect impact of their action or inaction, provide greater policy clarity and inclusiveness, and improve information for decision making. This work requires genuinely engaging with communities."

Mrs Scoullar said Speak Up had been highlighting the need to engage with communities for several years, but governments and the Murray-Darling Basin Authority have continually ignored the issue.

The draft report says: "We heard from people living in the Basin who have a deep distrust in governments - local, state and federal ... they feel abandoned by all levels of government."

"In our region we have totally lost trust in federal and state governments, though local government has worked alongside our organisation in advocating for change," Mrs Scoullar said.

Media Release

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“But is it any wonder the trust has been eroded with the way we have been treated by governments. When will we reach a ‘line in the sand’ where they acknowledge – like all the reports keep telling us - that the Basin Plan is failing our communities?

“We understand the political difficulties that accompany an admission by politicians or bureaucrats that ‘we’ve got it wrong’. But how much unnecessary suffering and loss of regional prosperity do we have to endure before they have the courage to admit the plan is not working effectively and must be fixed? We want to rebuild trust and engagement, but the first steps have to be taken by governments and the MDBA.”

In the draft report is also states: “Across a range of social and economic indicators, we see and have heard sufficient evidence for us to make an immediate call to action.”

“You cannot get clearer than that,” Mrs Scoullar said.

“The report calls for change. We’ve been calling for change for a number of years, but no-one takes any notice. The report says governments must find more effective ways to engage with our communities, provide clarity around long-term policy, and drive greater accountability and improved delivery of outcomes.

“It’s first recommendation is that ‘all Basin governments and relevant authorities must work together cooperatively to deliver the Basin Plan’. Surely, the time has arrived to stop the political games, stop the procrastination and start taking the necessary steps to deliver a plan that works for the nation and our communities.

“The first step must be pausing water recovery, quarantining the remaining funds and fixing the Basin Plan so we address the real problems, not the symptoms,” Mrs Scoullar said.

She said Speak Up would be preparing a submission into the draft report, and while it generally welcomed the report’s content there were some issues which the panel could address more thoroughly.

These include the economic damage which has occurred over the past eight years and the ongoing waste of a resource that could provide a huge social and economic boost to communities.

“We must highlight that the time for action is now. We cannot wait any longer because our region is in crisis. Governments must act, and act quickly,” Mrs Scoullar said.

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