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New Minister needs to visit Southern Basin

New federal Water Minister Keith Pitt needs to visit the southern part of the Murray-Darling Basin as a matter of urgency, according to peak farming and community organisations.

Three leading advocacy groups said they would welcome a visit from Mr Pitt, who needs to get an immediate understanding of the unique problems in this part of the Basin.

The Murray Regional Strategy Group, Speak Up Campaign and Southern Riverina Irrigators have battled against the odds to get the Federal Government to understand the damage to their communities from what they describe as a “failing Basin Plan”.

It is fraught with issues that are causing unnecessary environmental damage and leading to massive water waste which is not in the best interests of the nation.

“We would have preferred the new Water Minister to be someone from the southern regions who has a better historic understanding of water. Member for Nicholls Damian Drum would seem the obvious choice.

“But if we have to have another northerner – the third in a row – we want to ensure he is well versed on our unique issues,” Speak Up chair Shelley Scoullar said.

Southern Riverina Irrigators chair Chris Brooks said in recent months progress had been made in discussions with former Water Minister David Littleproud, in particular through his appointment of Mick Keelty as the Inspector-General of the Murray-Darling Basin.

“We have been working closely with Mr Keelty through his inquiry, and a vast range of organisations across our region collaborated to present a united submission highlighting our issues and presenting solutions.

“I am disappointed that David Littleproud has made no real attempt to make much needed changes to water management, and now has not seen the Keelty process through, which was his promise to engage with us.

“It is important that Mr Pitt is across the unintended consequences of the Basin Plan, and most importantly the positive steps which can be taken to fix some of the problems which it has caused, in particular to my members and communities.

“We look forward to discussions with him in the very near future,” Mr Brooks said.

The Murray Regional Strategy Group is a key advocacy organisation in the Southern Riverina, representing industry organisations, local government, community and Indigenous groups. It was formed after requests by governments to have a united regional voice.

Its chair, Alan Mathers, said he would welcome an immediate visit by Mr Pitt, and suggested he should be accompanied by Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

“Our Group was involved in a deputation to Mr Morrison in April last year, when we received a positive hearing. While he acknowledged fixing problems with the Basin Plan was difficult, we received a commitment that he would investigate what could be done.

“That is almost 12 months ago and we have not been able to engage with Mr Morrison since then. I appreciate he has had other priorities in the early months of his re-elected government, followed by the bushfire crisis.

“However, now would seem the right time for Mr Morrison to visit our area, get a first-hand account of the damage from the Basin Plan and the impact of other associated water policy settings on our communities, the environment and the nation’s prosperity, and lead the changes which are desperately needed.

“With the economic headwinds being faced by the Government, it makes sense to ensure we have effective water management, instead of wasting vast quantities, which is currently happening. There are smart solutions and as an intelligent nation we must stop squandering water and start using it wisely. __

“Our key goal is to work with governments so this can be achieved. We look forward to early dialogue with Mr Pitt, and it is of the utmost importance that the Prime Minister accompanies Mr Pitt on his visit to our region,” Mr Mathers said.

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