

Food for thought in Ernst & Young's basin plan report

A report by consultants Ernst & Young on the 450GL efficiency measures component of the Murray Darling Basin Plan has provided food for thought, and plenty of work for basin state Governments, says the National Irrigators Council CEO, Steve Whan.

The 450GL of efficiency measures are the component of the Basin Plan sometimes referred to as “up-water”. Fully delivered they are the component that would bring the water recovery target up to the equivalent of 3,200GL (around 10% of the water that flows into basin rivers).

When the basin plan was announced, the then Labor Government promised that this component would come only if it were possible with improved or at least no negative impacts on communities.

Basin Ministers commissioned this report to examine how that might be able to be achieved.

Steve Whan said “while this report leaves a lot of work to be done, it does highlight some important points. First it acknowledges that on farm programs can have negative flow on impacts on broader communities and it makes it clear that much more work needs to be done on the ground and with communities if they are to be a part of the process.

“NIC welcomes that, we don't want to see communities and the viability of irrigation districts compromised by blunt poorly designed programs. It highlights the key flaw of the current impact test. It tests only the individual, with no assessment of flow on community impacts (a standard South Australia would not have accepted with closure of automotive manufacturing or shipbuilding).

“I note the very strong commentary throughout the report that there is a ‘lack of understanding and trust’. Building trust and understanding takes time and effort, it wont be achieved by just applying a one size fits all program across the basin.

“The second key point in this report is the potential for off-farm projects to contribute to the target. The report provides a number of possibilities including changes to other infrastructure, river management and even greater urban efficiency from the cities using Murray Darling water (including Canberra and Adelaide).

“Those proposals are worth pursuing – but they will clearly take time.

“There are very genuine and justified fears about impact on communities if this is handled badly. This report gives some strong direction on the amount of work that needs to be done, and a clear message to take our time and get it right.”

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