

WEDNESDAY 9 JUNE 2010

How should Australia manage environmental water?

After planned water buybacks have been completed, the Australian Government is projected to be the holder of rights to approximately 20% of extracted water in the Murray-Darling Basin.

'How that water will be managed; who will be responsible for making decisions about it; how the general community will be able to monitor how well that water is being used; and who will decide whether the environment is receiving sufficient water, are all questions that are yet to be answered.' said Mick Keogh, Executive Director of the Australian Farm Institute.

The Australian Farm Institute has commissioned the following policy experts to answer some of these questions, and to propose a framework for the future management of environmental water. Their conclusions are outlined in the forthcoming research report *'Making Decisions about Environmental Water Allocations'*.

- Professor Richard H. Norris, Director of the Institute for Applied Ecology, University of Canberra
- Professor Jeff Bennett, Director of the Environmental Economics Research Hub, Crawford School, Australian National University
- Professor Mike Young, Executive Director of the Environment Institute, University of Adelaide
- Professor Richard T. Kingsford, Director of the Australian Wetlands and Rivers Centre, School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of NSW

'Given that the Australian public will, in future, be the owners of water assets valued in excess of \$3 billion, it is important to make sure these assets are managed in a way that maximises the return from them, while at the same time enabling irrigated agriculture to continue to make a large contribution to national economic output.' said Mr Keogh.

'The fact that there is no current consensus or common methodology between economists and environmental scientists should lead to question about the feasibility of the current strategy which relies entirely on scientific assessment. Unless there is a balanced and transparent process that allows a balance to be achieved between scientific and socio-economic impacts, then it is unlikely that sustainable and long-lasting policy solutions will be achieved.'

'Internationally, scientists and environmental groups are strongly embracing the need to place a value on environmental assets, and to use that value in making decisions that balance sustainability and human needs. Unfortunately, it appears that this approach has not yet been embraced in Australia.'

'There is also a strong undercurrent in Australia of what might be termed the "pre-1788" mentality, which implies that any human-related change to the environment is undesirable. This is reflected in water audits that compare modelled pre-1788 conditions with a current drought-affected condition, and conclude that damage has been substantial and needs to be reversed. Disregarding the continuous evolution of the environment with

human activity could create another risk, weakening food and fibre production capacity and denying farmers the opportunity to adapt their practices and play a full part in the future management of the Australian environment.' said Mick Keogh, Executive Director of the Australian Farm Institute.

The results of this research will be discussed at a launch seminar on Friday 11 June 2010 at the Universtiy House in Canberra.

Ends

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