

Weekly Times 6/4/22

# Buybacks taken off the water recovery table

IT HAS been a good season for irrigators in northern Victoria with decent inflows to our storages, 100 per cent allocations — even strong flows down the Darling River.

In fact, it could be the best season I've seen in my seven years as the Water Minister — but we also need to face the challenges of the Murray Darling Basin Plan. The Plan allows for, but doesn't mandate, water recovery of an additional 450 gigalitres on top of the baseline 2750 gigalitres. Any recovery of this additional water must be done in a way that doesn't damage our farming communities.

We continue to support projects that don't take water from productive use. A good example is GMW's \$177 million Water Efficiency Project that will deliver nearly 16 gigalitres in savings by reducing losses through evaporation in seepage without negatively impacting farmers. But Victoria strongly opposes buy-



Socio-economic criteria is essential to 'Plan' projects, writes **LISA NEVILLE**

backs towards the 450 gigalitres or any other target. Even when buybacks are voluntary they take productive water out of the consumptive pool, drive up water prices and damage communities.

In 2018, the Basin Ministerial Council agreed to socio-economic criteria for all water recovery projects to protect against job losses, social economic harm in communities and the damaging impacts of water recovery.

Victoria led the push for this criteria, which was agreed to and adopted by all jurisdictions, including South Australia. We won't be changing our position on that and risking more job losses, reduction in economic activity or negative social impacts for our communities.

The Basin Plan is delivering results for the environment. We have strong evidence of the benefits to rivers, wetlands, wildlife and vegetation. However, further water recovery towards the 450 gigalitres could exacerbate deliverability issues, including risks for the environment and irrigators.

In recent years there has been increasing pressure on the Murray and Goulburn rivers to deliver larger amounts of trade and environmental water downstream.

There are natural constraints to delivering these large amounts of water at the Barmah Choke — and there has also been environmental damage to the Goulburn River from constant high flows. These deliverability issues need to be addressed as we consider

any more water recovery projects. We don't want the ridiculous situation of more environmental water causing environmental damage — let alone increasing delivery risk for irrigators.

Victoria has achieved 826 gigalitres of its 1075 gigalitre obligation under the Plan — with the remainder to come through offset projects such as the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration project, which uses recovered water to reinvigorate wetlands and floodplains.

As the Productivity Commission has said, the looming 2024 deadline for the delivery of offset projects like this under the Plan should be extended or important environmental projects could be left undone.

And, as the Victorian Government has said — and continues to say — the socio-economic criteria must stay and buybacks should be off the table.

• **Lisa Neville is the Victorian Water Minister**