

Tuesday, 10 August 2010

Irrigators welcome ALP commitment to “recover the gap”

Irrigators have welcomed an ALP commitment to “recover the gap” between current diversions in the Murray Darling Basin and proposed new “sustainable diversion limits” (SDLs) but warned this should not be seen as acceptance of any recommendations contained in the forthcoming Basin Plan.

The National Irrigators’ Council said the position of the ALP to buy back from willing sellers any water needed to meet the new SDLs was a step in the right direction and an endorsement of NIC policy.

NIC CEO Danny O’Brien said the policy was recognition of irrigators’ property rights and that if governments want water for the environment or any other purpose, they should buy it.

“Our first priority for the election is the retention of the current \$5.8 billion for infrastructure efficiency works and the \$3.1 billion allocated for buyback. We welcome the ALP’s commitment to these programs and to go further and provide more funds if necessary to continue purchases from willing sellers.

“We expect the focus to remain on infrastructure works in the short to medium term. A government commitment to recover the gap ensures that irrigators who want to stay in the industry and keep producing food and fibre for the nation can do so with no or limited impact on the reliability of their entitlements. It will also allow those irrigators who want to get out of the industry to do so with dignity.

“Buying out the gap will be a lot cleaner and simpler for both irrigators and taxpayers than a complex compensation formula. We now call on the Coalition to match the commitment.”

However Mr O’Brien said neither the commitment nor the NIC’s support of it should be seen as acceptance of whatever is proposed in the Basin Plan.

“We remain very concerned that the Basin Plan proposal will strip significant amounts of water from Basin communities, costing jobs, driving up food prices and forcing families off farms that have been held for generations.

“We must have balance in the Basin Plan and if that is not delivered by the MDBA then governments need to be prepared to step in to get it right. All Australians will suffer if the balance between the needs of the environment and those of food and fibre producers and rural communities isn’t right.”

Mr O’Brien was cautious on proposals to change arrangements relating to the Menindee Lakes and said the NIC would await further details before commenting.

“We would welcome any measures to reduce losses at Menindee but want to ensure irrigators are not disadvantaged by any changes to the arrangements surrounding the storages there.”

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