



## **JOINT PRESS RELEASE**

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FOR THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN**

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### **REAL ACTION ON THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN**

The Coalition will take real action to safeguard the future of the Murray-Darling Basin.

The biggest environmental problem Australia faces is reconciling the human, economic and environmental problems of the Murray-Darling Basin.

We will commit \$751.5 million over the forward estimates to deliver real action for the Murray-Darling Basin.

The Coalition is committed to achieving sustainability for the rivers of the Murray-Darling and is equally committed to continuing food and agricultural production in the communities of the Murray-Darling Basin. We understand the importance of managing water carefully. The previous Coalition Government created the first federal ministry with responsibility for water, allocated more than \$10 billion to water reform and passed the Water Act 2007.

Despite belatedly adopting national management as their policy, Labor has failed to deliver on the plan that John Howard announced, funded and legislated in 2007. This failure to act in a timely way has resulted in three largely wasted years for our greatest river system.

The future of the Murray-Darling should not and cannot be a choice between the environment or agriculture. We will end the delays, act on the concerns of basin communities and end the blatant politicking that has spoiled so many previous efforts at water reform.

The Coalition will deliver effective national management by delivering on the stalled 2007 ten point national plan for the Murray-Darling Basin.

The Coalition will release the draft Basin Plan within two weeks of coming to office and proceed with its implementation without delay. Labor's delays must come to an end. Irrigators, food producers and communities throughout the basin are crippled with the uncertainty of how much water they will each lose and those most concerned about environmental assets worry about whether the water will start flowing soon enough to rescue them.

There must be full and transparent public consultation on the consequences of the draft Basin Plan. We want to bring the communities of the basin with us on the journey of reform.

The Coalition will also take real action to fix inefficient on-farm irrigation infrastructure. We will commit an additional \$300 million to invest in rural water infrastructure, a crucial step in saving water for the environment while keeping the economic engines of the Basin alive.

The Coalition will also commence works on the Menindee Lakes re-engineering programme within twelve months of coming to office. This project has the potential to save up to 200 billion litres of water per year. The Coalition is committed to a strategic approach to water buybacks. The Coalition supports the purchase of water entitlements from willing sellers, however, Labor's ad-hoc approach to buybacks risks water being bought in the wrong places.

Funds must be spent according to a plan, not to suit political imperatives. This consultative approach will ensure that buybacks deliver not just the environmental flows needed, but are also undertaken in a manner that provides greater certainty to irrigators and the communities in which they live, as well as value for money for taxpayers.

The Coalition will support basin communities by commissioning an urgent study of the economic and social impacts of the draft Basin Plan, to be conducted jointly by the Productivity Commission and ABARE, and re-constituting the Basin Community Committee so that it reports directly to the minister and the ministerial council. The Coalition will also provide an additional \$200 million to the Strengthening Basin Communities program and expand its scope so that basin communities can build more diverse and resilient economies.

Recognising that existing water entitlements constitute a property right that should not be reduced without compensation, a Coalition Government would commit to “bridge any gap” between the eventual limits on water use and the amount of water that has been saved through investments in water efficiencies and the purchase of water entitlements from willing sellers. This will be achieved by a combination of further investments in water efficiency and purchases of water from willing sellers. These additional investments will be made from 2014 upon the implementation of the Basin Plan.

The Coalition will take real action to support the world famous Coorong wetlands in South Australia by prioritising 2010-11 Environmental Water Holdings to raise the water level in Lake Alexandrina, purchasing additional 150 billion litres of water in 2010-11 for Lower Lakes and Coorong, and seeking Ministerial Council agreement to spill water from Lake Alexandrina into the Coorong.

This intervention by the Coalition will provide real and effective assistance to the Lower Lakes and Coorong at a time when it can make the most difference. If rainfall patterns return to near the long-term average, it will also assist in a faster rehabilitation of the Lakes, faster re-opening of the Mouth and allow Commonwealth Environmental Water Holdings in future years to be allocated for other environmental priorities.

In a growing and hungry world Australia must continue to produce food in Australia, grown by Australians, for Australians and for export to the rest of the world. The need to return water to preserve our environmental assets should not eliminate the need to find ways for Australia to produce more food for the future. To support this objective, the Coalition will create a \$500 million fund to secure Australia's future water supplies for productive purposes especially, but not exclusively, those within the fertile lands of the Murray Darling Basin.

Contributions from the fund will be made from the existing Sustainable Rural Water Use and Infrastructure program.

The Coalition put the Murray-Darling Basin on the path to national management in 2007. We started the process of fixing the Murray-Darling and we remain committed to that process.

If elected, we will finish what we started.

11 August 2010