

South Australian irrigators welcome proposed changes to carryover water policy

ABC Rural / By Victor Petrovic and Eliza Berlage

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Irrigators along the Murray River in SA hope new changes to carryover will help water security. (ABC News)

South Australian irrigators have welcomed a new proposal which would change the system for water users to carry over water from one year to the next.

Irrigators raised concerns last year about the potential of losing water they conserved for dry periods but have now agreed with the Murraylands and Riverland Landscape Board (MRLB) on a new policy.

The proposed changes to the River Murray water allocation plan will mean there will be no forfeiture of water and no automatic rollover of allocations for the next year if they are above 50 per cent.

Carryover will also be able to be used in the year its granted.

The issue of carryover has been a source of contention, particularly in times of drought, allowing water entitlement holders to take any unused water from the previous season into the current one, and giving irrigators the insurance of water availability in dry years.

Key points:

- A proposal has been made to change the system for carryover water
- Irrigators have welcomed the suggestion, which sees them conserve water they are allocated for dry years
- The proposal will now go to community consultation, before being taken to the minister



Irrigators want certainty for their water allocations in dry years. (Supplied: Nutrien Ag Solutions)

A guaranteed return on investment

Meningie dairy farmer Sam Dodd said the proposed changes were "much needed" and a "significant improvement on the old ones".

"The whole purpose of having carryover water is to provide security for irrigators; but I don't mean just water security, I mean economic security," he said.

"If you invest in water then you have the expectation that you're going to be able to utilise it, whereas the old policy often resulted in not just the loss of the economic investment but also the facility or the ability to actually utilise the water."

Irrigators have been lobbying for changes through the MRLB since the last policy was agreed in April 2021.

Mr Dodd believes the current policy is not fit for purpose.

"People were investing up to six-figure dollar sums in buying water and at the end of one season, when there was a belief they'd be below full allocations," he said.

"But when we had wet winters, we hit full allocations, so irrigators were no longer able to access the water that they had carried over, which had significant impacts economically."

"The whole purpose of it was undermined by a rather fraught policy."



At the southern end of the Murray Darling Basin, the Murray River snakes its way along Renmark, in South Australia. (ABC Rural: Caitlyn Gribbin)

The MRLB has been on the ground to understand the concerns of irrigators with the current policy.

Presiding member Dianne Davidson thinks a good balance has been struck.

"The real catalyst has been that the last iteration of the rules really was not as suitable, or as sensible or as workable as we'd hoped," Ms Davidson said.

"People were unhappy about the loss of their water in the prior year or two and needed changes.

"So, in the last six months, despite COVID, we've had many meetings, trying to work out a policy that would be acceptable to everybody."

The Renmark Irrigation Trust was involved in the meetings and supported the changes to carryover.

"The Trust is really excited about these changes, as under the current arrangement, if allocations reach 100 per cent water conserved for a potential dry year is lost, and the proposal means that will no longer be the case," chief executive Rosalie Auricht said.



Rosalie Auricht says the proposed changes will be good for irrigators. (ABC Riverland: Anita Ward)

One of the concessions in the proposed plan is that carryover will no longer be automatically granted, and that irrigators will need to apply for it.

However, Ms Auricht is confident that the new proposal will still lead to a simpler process for irrigators.

"Under the current arrangements, which were not fit for purpose; instead of using the private carryover arrangement, irrigators were instead putting their economic activity interstate, which already has an application process," she said.

"We believe the application process will be no different to selling your water or parking it interstate, so we don't see it a retrograde step, we see it as a proactive step."

The proposed changes to the plan are now open for comment through multiple community consultation sessions, before being sent to South Australia's water minister as a recommendation to enact changes.

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