

Subject: Opposition to Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Bill 2023

I am writing to express my strong opposition to the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Bill 2023 in its current form. This legislation poses a significant threat to regional economies and the livelihoods of thousands of individuals who rely on agriculture and related industries.

The legislation must retain the socioeconomic protections agreed to in 2012 and avoid buybacks at all costs.

The impacts of buybacks go well beyond the farm gate.

Irrigated agriculture is one of the biggest economic drivers in our community and if the industry takes a hit, the entire local economy takes a hit. We cannot afford the job losses to small business and frontline services that will inevitably follow this blow to farmers. Each dollar generated on farm is spent 2.5 times in the local economy. It is not just the farmers who lose, it is the bakeries, mechanics, newsagents, coffee shops, fuel stations and so on. The impact is felt too by services such as hospitals and schools which lose services and staff.

The proposed bill deviates substantially from the original 2012 Murray-Darling Basin Plan, which had bipartisan support and was endorsed by all Basin States. It blatantly disregards the agreed-upon criteria around negative socioeconomic impact and would have devastating impacts on regional communities.

By limiting options and removing socio-economic protections, such as the 1500 GL Cap on buybacks, the bill exposes Basin communities to an unknown volume of buybacks, an insecure water supply for production, and a highly uncertain future.

In the 2012 Basin Plan, recovering water towards the 450 GL promised to South Australia was conditional on having only neutral or improved socio-economic outcomes. That's why the then Water Minister, Tony Burke, ruled out buybacks because of the community downsides. If the Commonwealth mandates the acquisition of the 450GL it must remain as the original Basin Plan framework defined in Schedule 5, and devoid of any negative socio-economic outcomes. That is, any water recovered under the provisions for the 450GL must be recovered in the Southern Basin to meet the environmental outcomes it is intended for, primarily in South Australia. The Northern Basin was never intended to contribute to this, as any Northern Basin water recovered for these purposes cannot achieve the outcomes required. To open the Northern Basin up to contribute to this recovery shows a clear lack of comprehension regarding the geography and hydrology of the Basin, and a blatant arrogance towards the communities which will suffer at the hands of a government only interested in political point-scoring. There is no science here, just raw politics with complete disdain to Northern Basin communities.

Furthermore, the Bill fails to address key degradation drivers identified by scientists and now posing the greatest threat to river health. Instead of even more water, on top of the 2975 billion litres already recovered under the Basin Plan and earlier

reforms, the rivers now urgently need measures targeting invasive species (carp), habitat degradation, barriers to fish passage, and other critical issues. Continuing the simplistic approach of 'just add more water' will not fix these complex challenges. Since the turn of the century, 1 in 3 litres of irrigation water has been redirected to the environment, this now means just 28% of all Basin inflows are diverted for towns, industry and agriculture.

The Federal Government's intervention in the water market will also increase the cost of water, a vital input to growing food. High costs for farmers to grow less food mean higher prices at the checkout, contributing to the cost-of-living crisis. Water recovery decimates Basin communities through loss of production which in turn flows through the entire community.

A report by the Victorian Government found using buybacks would reduce economic output in the southern Basin by \$855 million annually and result in 1500 job losses. We cannot afford for this to happen.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the Basin Plan's objective to implement Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) has already been achieved and is currently being complied with, with 98 per cent of water recovery targets met. Water recovery was always intended as a means to achieve SDLs, not an end in itself.

The original 2012 Basin Plan was subject to a Regulatory Impact Statement; this rewrite has not even been run through that most basic of prisms. In light of these concerns, I urge you to carefully reconsider the implications of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Bill 2023.