Water savings drive

SUE NEALES
RURAL REPORTER

Farmers in the vast Murray-Darling Basin will not have to hand back much more of their valuable irrigation licences after state and federal government ministers yesterday announced they are certain that enough water to save the ailing river system and its wetlands, red gums and ecosystems can be found in other ways.

Federal Water Minister Bob Baldwin is confident that, after an independent "stocktake" of ongoing state government river-health projects and channel engineering works, the same environmental outcomes specified in the $10 billion Murray-Darling Basin Plan can be achieved without retrieving an extra 500-650 gigalitres of water from farmers and irrigated basin communities.

The move effectively reduces the amount of water to be taken from irrigators and returned to the river system from the 2750GL outlined in the legislated 2012 plan to just 2100GL.

Farmers expressed relief yesterday that the hardest adjustment period since the government started using public funds to claw back water to save Australia's biggest river system might be over.

But green groups fear governments are playing with water savings "on paper alone" to pacify uneasy Nationals and Country Liberal MPs, and that the claimed environmental benefits of still-to-be-completed and scientifically assessed engineering and water projects will never be delivered.

"Our concern is that the water 'saved' by these projects they are talking about isn't real water going back to the rivers and entire system; it is just on paper," said the Australian Conservation Foundation's Arlene Harriss-Buchan.

"The reality is that rivers and wetlands need actual water over the long term; concrete, steel and pumping water into wetlands occasionally just isolates the wetlands from the river system, is not sustainable in the long term, trashes what the ... basin plan was supposed to be about."

Deniliquin rice farmer and chairman of the Southern Riverina Irrigators group John Bradford said the announcement was a win for common sense.

He said it gave a reprieve to farmers and river communities worried about more water licences being sold from their districts, leaving once productive farming communities with less income and fewer crops and jobs.

"We need to keep as much productive water in hands of irrigators; I applaud the state governments for making sure they are meeting their obligations to deliver or save water because the risk was always that there would be more harmful buybacks," Mr Bradford said.

"River communities are hurting because the basin plan hasn't adhered to the triple bottom line and delivered equally to the environment, the economy and people; this ... will help restore confidence and lets us know the water is going to be there for us in the future."

Some of the projects credited with "saving water" and reducing the need for the plan to claw back as much as 2750GL from irrigators include building levy banks around key wetlands and river red gum areas such as Hattah Lakes, the Gumbower and Kondrook-Perricoota Forests, then periodically pumping water into them, rather than flooding the area by raising the level of the entire Murray River and its key tributaries.

Other "water savings" are being delivered by meeting environmental targets in some upper parts of the Murray and Goulburn rivers, with the same water that will then be used again by irrigators downstream.

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1500GL cap on basin water buybacks

Murray-Darling water cap gets green light

AAP

A 1500-GIGALITRE cap will be put on water bought under Murray-Darling Basin contracts, with Labor and crossbenchers backing a government bill.

The bill, which passed the Senate on Monday, will work alongside an estimated $2.5 million a day of government funds being spent on farm pipes and channels to improve water efficiency.

Environment Minister Greg Hunt says Australia’s greatest water system will no longer be “over-subscribed and over-taxed”.

“We will ensure the water that is saved is shared between the farmers and the rivers,” he told reporters in Canberra.

To date, 1,164 gigalitres of water has been bought, leaving some headroom before the cap is reached.

Mr Hunt said the plan was on track to achieve 2750 gigalitres being returned by mid-2019 “with the very clear prospect the additional water required can also be achieved”.

Parliamentary secretary for the environment Bob Baldwin said there would be benefits for the environment, agriculture, tourism, fishing and Murray-Darling communities.

Asked whether the government’s focus was shifting from buybacks to infrastructure, Mr Hunt said a mix of both was needed but the emphasis was on “a re-plumbing of rural Australia rather than a buy-out of rural Australia”.

Summary:

Federal government water buybacks in the Murray-Darling basin will be capped at 1500 billion litres after the Coalition won the backing of Labor and key crossbenchers in the Senate to pass the measure.

Environment Minister Greg Hunt said Australia had moved closer to achieving the long-term sustainability of agriculture and the environment with the passage of the measure.

Mr Hunt said the 1500GL cap was a ceiling, not a target, and the government would continue to prioritise water recovery through investment in on and off-farm infrastructure.

The government is investing $2.5 million a day until June 2019 into irrigated agriculture.

More than 10,000 farmers have received investment under the program that aims to improve productivity and support the long-term future of the regions.

“We will ensure that the water that is saved is shared between the farmers and the rivers,” Mr Hunt said.

“We are on track, on the latest analysis, to achieve our goal of 2750 gigalitres being returned to the Murray-Darling basin, with the very clear prospect that the additional water required can also be achieved.”

So far, 1,164.6GL of water has been purchased, leaving 335.4GL of “headroom” before the 1500GL limit would be reached.

The 1500GL cap on water purchases was a Coalition pre-election commitment. “The Basin Plan represents the culmination of more than two decades of water reform, two decades of bipartisanship, and two decades of co-operation between all basin governments,” Mr Hunt said.

The bill will also amend the Basin Plan to broaden the types of efficiency projects to include participation by consumptive water users in off-farm efficiency projects.

As part of reforms, the government is making a capital investment of almost $6 billion in the future of irrigated agriculture.

Cotton Australia general manager Michael Murray said the changes would benefit his industry and put the spotlight firmly on efficiency measures to meet remaining recovery targets under the plan.