

Calls for action on Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism projects

Concerns heightened in the wake of the NSW Government suspending consultation on a key project.

In the interests of protecting our communities, Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited, Murray Irrigation Limited, and Murrumbidgee Irrigation Limited have come together to push for action on the implementation of the approved NSW Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) projects in the wake of the NSW Government suspending consultation on a key project.

The SDLAM projects were created as a part of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan to protect communities and agricultural production while still delivering outcomes for the environment. Under legislation, at least 605GL can be saved via the projects and if they fail to deliver the required savings the onus will likely fall back to communities to offer up more productive water.

Yet landholder negotiations at the Menindee Lakes project, which is one of the most important parts in delivering water savings, have recently been suspended. If it is not completed by 2024 it will represent a failure to save an estimated 106GL of the 605GL that is possible.

The projects are integrated, so a failure to implement any one of them, regardless of location, represents a risk to the whole mechanism. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) is required to conduct a reconciliation in 2024 to measure outcomes and any shortfall identified then will reduce the amount of water that can be used for production (the sustainable diversion limit) in the NSW Murray and Murrumbidgee valleys.

Whilst 2024 may seem like a long time away, these projects have very long lead times. Yet at the end of 2020 none were complete and only one of the SDLAM projects was even on track to meet the target.

Should the current approved SDLAM projects not proceed, or alternatives be agreed and implemented, communities and irrigators remain at risk of further water recovery through the Basin Plan. Clearly, this water is most likely to come from the irrigators in our districts, which is completely unacceptable to our customers and our communities who are reliant on irrigation.

We cannot afford to be left with this uncertainty so we are calling on the NSW Government to immediately outline a clear pathway to show how they propose to protect irrigation communities from a further reduction in water availability.

We understand that some local communities have reservations with the current projects and it is the role of government to address these concerns or find viable alternatives. Our organisations are committed to continuing to work with government to find and implement solutions that can be broadly accepted. We need to protect the thousands of irrigators in our valleys and our communities that are dependent on irrigation.

Our grave concerns are backed by the MDBA which recently stated that it is “increasingly unlikely that the SDL adjustment program will be fully delivered by June 2024, putting the overall SDL adjustment at risk”.

We are urging irrigators, and all those with an interest in healthy communities in our valleys, to engage with the NSW Government to ensure that they work with communities and implement all approved SDL projects, or identify and implement viable alternatives, without delay.

Our organisations view this issue as being extremely serious, representing a real risk to the future of our customers. If we do nothing, our irrigators, regional economies, towns and communities will be left to carry the burden in 2024 when the MBDA reconciles progress. And we can't afford that.

Quotes for attribution:

Clifford Ashby, CEO, Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited

“The impact of a further reduction in irrigation water in the Murrumbidgee and NSW Murray valleys would decimate communities and economies

reliant upon irrigated agriculture. It would also have a wider impact since the Basin supports 9,200 irrigated agriculture businesses producing \$22 billion worth of food and fibre annually.”

Phil Endley, CEO, Murray Irrigation Limited

“Our organisations remain committed to continuing to work with government to find and implement solutions that can be broadly accepted to protect the thousands of irrigators in our valleys and our communities that are dependent on irrigation.”

Brett Jones, CEO, Murrumbidgee Irrigation Limited

“Should the current approved SDLAM projects not proceed, or alternatives be agreed and implemented, communities and irrigators remain at risk of further water recovery by the Commonwealth. Clearly, this water is most likely to come from the irrigators in our districts, which is completely unacceptable to our customers and our communities who are reliant on irrigation.”

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