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Friday 18th May 2018

Report - Agreement on 'socio-economic neutrality' key to Basin Plan success.

LOCAL government, in collaboration with the CSIRO and the University of Canberra may play a key role in ensuring the Murray-Darling Basin Plan achieves socio-economic neutrality in relation to the recovery of the 450GL up water.

The Murray Darling Association, the peak body for local government in the Murray-Darling Basin since 1944 is calling for intergovernmental support for a review of the definition of socio-economic neutrality in the Basin Plan legislation.

MDA chief executive officer Emma Bradbury outlined the association's proposal in a presentation to the Basin Officials Committee in Albury last Thursday. The briefing followed similar presentations by the MDA, CSIRO, and Dr Schirmer to the Murray Darling Basin Authority and the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources in Canberra last week.

The absence of an agreed definition of 'socio-economic neutrality' has seen tensions over the recovery of the additional 450GL of up-water escalate to the point of placing the future of the Basin Plan at risk.

The current definition in the Basin Plan provides that willing individual participation in water efficiency measures equals socio-economic neutrality. This definition is inconsistent with accepted definitions of socio-economic impacts and is also inconsistent with Commonwealth guidelines on socio-economic impact assessment.

The MDA in collaboration with the CSIRO and the University of Canberra has developed a proposal to establish an agreed definition of socio-economic neutrality and a consistent framework for assessing it in the context of Basin Plan implementation.

The need for a fair and equitable socio-economic impacts assessment framework is well recognised, with Aither's review of socio-economic neutrality in the context of Murray-Darling Basin Plan implementation, prepared for the NSW Department of Primary Industries in 2017 clearly identifying that the current definition does not meet the overarching intent of the Basin Plan to consider the socio-economic impacts of 'up-water' programs.

The NSW State Government is already applying a social impact assessment framework to mining, petroleum production and extractive industries modelled on similar tools in use in Qld; and

Victoria's work by TC&A and Frontier Economics recognises the interrelatedness of the Basin water supplies and demands in each state, and the need for a consistent assessment process.

"There is some great work already available. With the CSIRO and Dr Jackie Schirmer of the University of Canberra providing the technical expertise for this project, and local government leading community engagement, the agreed definition and assessment framework will support the MDBA building community confidence in the process and provide a pathway for the 450GL that "everyone can live with," Ms Bradbury said.

National President Cr David Thurley added "Following the recent return to bipartisanship, I am hopeful that all Basin governments will now support the development of an agreed definition of 'socio-economic neutrality' and adopt an assessment framework that accounts for individual program participation, broader impacts on irrigators and irrigation infrastructure operators, and cumulative impacts across communities."

This will be a key element to build the confidence and trust required to implement the Basin Plan on time and in full, and will provide a valuable tool for government and communities across the Basin," he said.

The Murray Darling Association's board members are:

Albury City Council	Cr David Thurley	0419 510 274
Moira Shire Council	Cr Peter Mansfield	0428 574 433
Murray River Council	Cr Alan Mathers	0427 209 806
Wentworth Shire Council	Mayor Melisa Hederics	0429 848 480
Renmark Paringa Council	Cr Peter Hunter	0447 177 341
Alexandrina Council	Cr Barry Featherston	0417 808 565
Town of Walkerville	Cr David Shetliffe	0414 631 442
Northern Areas Council	Mayor Denis Clark	0408 148 725
Leeton Shire Council	Mayor Paul Maytom	0447 293 829
Gunnedah Shire Council	Cr John Campbell	0408 421 065
Balonne Shire Council	Mayor Richard Marsh	0409 692 299

ENDS

For more information, contact Murray Darling Association Chief Executive Officer, Emma Bradbury on 0429 905 017 or National President Cr David Thurley on 0419 510 274.