

Media Release

The Hon Lisa Neville MP
Minister for Police
Minister for Water



The Hon Melinda Pavey MP
Minister for Water,
Property & Housing



Friday, 29 November 2020

COMMONWEALTH FAILS BASIN COMMUNITIES

The Commonwealth Government refused to accept that the 2024 date for the 605 gigalitre environmental projects is unrealistic – creating further uncertainty for regional communities.

Despite all states reaching agreement to reassess by 2022 the deliverability of the projects – a hard fought compromise engineered by Victoria, NSW and South Australia – the Commonwealth intervened in an unprecedented move and blocked the agreed way forward.

This means our communities still face uncertainty and it flies in the face of the agreement from Commonwealth to avoid buybacks – a fate which is now still on the table for water users.

The Commonwealth have previously committed to no buybacks, yet the legislative framework suggests entitlements could be at risk if 605 gigalitre environmental projects are not delivered.

Regional communities across the Southern Basin had called on the Ministerial Council to acknowledge that the 2024 deadline is unrealistic – as confirmed by the Productivity Commission – and come up with a way forward which protects their interests.

It is very disappointing to see the Commonwealth appear to have abandoned their role as facilitator and actively obstructed a realistic solution – which was agreed to by all the States yet will now not proceed.

Victoria and NSW have today confirmed they will both continue to stand up for our Basin communities – pushing for a change in the 2024 delivery date in the legislation.

However, in a key win for Victoria, a commitment was secured to ensure deliverability is a key focus of Ministerial Council work going forward.

An independent panel, led by Dr Jane Doolan, will progress work to understand and manage the shortfall risk for the River Murray system – extending their work until December 2021.

It was also agreed to monitor regulatory approvals for new or additional water extraction across the whole system, to better understand the cumulative impacts on delivery in the lower Murray region.

This follows Victoria leading the way by banning new extractive shares in the Murray, downstream of the choke – therefore protecting existing water users.

Victoria also secured agreement that the MDBA need to report every six months on what water efficiency projects have been approved, how they meet socio-economic criteria, and the outcomes of community consultation – to provide greater confidence and transparency for communities.

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Quotes attributable to Victorian Minister for Water Lisa Neville

"Today we saw an unprecedented move from the Commonwealth to intervene in a compromise agreed to by all the States – which would have provided a way forward to deliver the environmental projects for the Basin."

"This will be extremely unwelcome news for irrigation communities who have been crying out for certainty that we are doing everything we can to ensure they do not lose any more water from their entitlements."

"We cannot accept any further uncertainty for our farming communities, who are rightly worried that if projects in the Southern Basin are not finished more water will have to come from Victorian farmers to make up the shortfall."

Quotes attributable to NSW Minister for Water, Property and Housing Melinda Pavey

"All states compromised in the interest of the common good for our communities, but the Commonwealth Government walked away from an honest pathway forward to delivering these projects."

"Four of these constraint projects will require individual agreement for up to 4000 landholders. Communities at Yanco and Menindee have been loud and clear that the projects need to be flexible."

"It's ludicrous that the Commonwealth Government would walk away from the progress made by Basin State officials in the lead up to the Ministerial Council meeting, which would have given some clarity to finishing off the most ambitious and complex water reform process ever undertaken."

"Our communities demanded certainty as they recover from years of drought – the Commonwealth Government today walked away from a way forward."