

Murray farming 'devastated' by water buyback

EXCLUSIVE

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The \$3.2 billion Murray-Darling Basin water buyback should be suspended and water returned to irrigators, according to free-market economist Alan Moran.

Dr Moran, the director of the Australian Environment Foundation, which has attacked climate change activists and supported attacks on renewable energy, argues that Murray-Darling buybacks have reduced the agricultural output of the region "at a time when Australian agriculture is well placed to take advantage of increased export demand".

Dr Moran argues there is "no evidence of a long-term decline in rainfall across the basin.

Meanwhile we have policies in place that on some estimates have reduced the region's output by 20 per cent with devastating effect on once prosperous local communities."

Dr Moran argues the Murray-Darling Basin Authority should stop further water purchases and expenditures in the basin. He says the MDBA should start to resell the water that has been purchased from irrigators.

"Unless we abandon the present strategy of starving irrigators of water, the hysteria generated by claims of global warming risk will become a self-fulfilling prophecy," Dr Moran says.

He attacks a green activist lobby that is hostile to modern agriculture and its use of water.

National Irrigators Council chief executive Tom Chesson said now that the basin plan was getting into the implementation phase, "the reliance on computer models to develop the basin plan has been shown to be folly".

"There are certainly concerns that the basin plan has not delivered on the promise of a triple bottom line outcome," Mr Chesson said.

"There is widespread anger across the basin over the lack of explanation from governments and the MDBA as to what the basin plan beyond motherhood statements is actually meant to deliver."

But Jamie Pittock, an associate professor at the Australian National University, said Dr Moran's argument was "confused".

He said two key objectives of the basin plan were to keep the Murray mouth open and flush salt to the sea.

Under current allocations, the system was struggling to find enough water to meet these objectives.

He said the water buybacks had arguably made agriculture more efficient and had helped the productivity of the basin.

He also disputed Dr Moran's claim that production had fallen.

"All the evidence we've seen is of a small increase in agricultural production," Dr Pittock said.

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