

24 June 2016

Mike Walsh
Chair – GMW Connections Project Control Group
Goulburn-Murray Water
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Dear Mike

VFF RESPONSE TO THE CONNECTIONS PROJECT RESET OPTIONS

The VFF would like to thank you for the extension of the reset consultation period. This allowed the VFF to consult with members on the reset options and the future of the Connections Project.

The VFF welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback in response to the proposed reset plan and options. The VFF has supported the reset of the Connections Project to ensure this important modernisation project is completed, ensuring a sustainable and viable Goulburn Murray Irrigation District (GMID). Since its inception the Connections Project has been subject to unsustainable spending. Despite this, the VFF believes it is important to consider the future of the system in the reset of the project.

The VFF understands the need for the reset to focus on water savings in order to satisfy project funding requirements, however this requirement must not be at the unreasonable disadvantage of GMW customers, districts or the GMID as a whole. If this disadvantage is demonstrated the VFF will advocate for further funding to ensure the Connections Project is completed to an adequate standard. The work of the Connections project team must be done with consideration of the potential requirement for further funding.

The below recommendations have been formulated in consultation with VFF members and are measures necessary to ensure a fair outcome for irrigators whilst also driving the necessary project efficiencies.

1. Conditional use of Part 7A of the Water Act 1989

The VFF support the conditional use of the Ministers powers under Part 7A of the Act for the purpose of implementing reconfiguration plans where a single or small number of landholders are preventing a SCP agreement being reached. The application of Part 7A must be;

- fair and reasonable, including an appropriate appeals process
- not utilised to disconnect water users
- not utilised to force people to accept a connection that provides a service that is not fit for purpose
- applied equitably regardless of project budgetary constraints

2. Extension of project timeframe or deadline

The VFF support the extension of the project timeframe on the principle that the completion of the project to an adequate standard should be prioritised over the completion of the project within its original timeframe.

3. Transparency in the channel assessment process

The consultation paper identifies that the Connections project team have assessed every channel and are currently costing solutions for these channels. It is the VFF's position that results of this project should be made available to stakeholders to determine how far the remaining project funding will go. This is important to then allow stakeholders to assess whether more funding is required to complete the Connections Project to an adequate standard that does not disadvantage customers remaining to be connected nor put at jeopardy the future sustainability or viability of the GMID.

4. Landholder consultation

The VFF encourages the project team to continue to improve consultation processes with landholders. Active consultation with landholders and groups of landholders has proven to improve outcomes and goodwill. Consultation processes have been a consistent criticism of the Connections Project to date, continued improvement of these processes will be important in promoting landholder cooperation and ensuring the timely negotiation of agreements.

5. Prosecution of committed agreements

The VFF believes the above recommendations should also be applied, where relevant, to committed agreements. Appropriate resources should be allocated to the consideration of committed agreements to ensure any difficult or legacy cases are resolved in a timely manner.

Finally, the VFF holds concern regarding the revised aims and objectives of the project. This includes the aims and objectives to, 'Enhance the environment locally and across the Murray Darling Basin', and, 'Create water savings for environmental use across the Basin'. The VFF believes this is not an accurate indication of the purpose of the project and the role of water savings in the project. The purpose of the project is to modernise the water delivery systems in the GMID, creating a more efficient, sustainable irrigation system. The role of water recovery in the project is in order to satisfy the conditions of project funding. The VFF assert that clear acknowledgement of this will ensure the appropriate consideration of water savings in the reset of the project.

The VFF looks forward to continuing to engage in the reset and rollout of the Connections Project.

Yours sincerely



Peter Tuohey
President
Victorian Farmers Federation