

Media Release



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Basin Plan needs change to support job creation

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) is calling for greater adaptability within the Murray Darling Basin Plan to ensure farmers can once again farm with confidence and certainty, creating jobs to help recover from the COVID-19 economic disaster.

VFF Water Council Chair Richard Anderson said this week's meeting of Commonwealth and state water ministers is an opportunity to make important changes to the Basin Plan.

"We need Ministerial Council to focus on common sense updates to the Plan to ensure farmers can produce food and create jobs."

"The Basin Plan is supposed to be an adaptive plan. Changes need to be made if agriculture is going to help lead Australia's economic recovery," Mr Anderson said.

Mr Anderson reinforced this message when he recently met with Federal Water Minister Keith Pitt and Victorian Water Minister Lisa Neville leading into this week's Ministerial Council meeting.

"Agriculture is one of the largest employers in regional and rural areas, but jobs in agriculture have been declining because of Basin Plan uncertainty."

"The law allows for changes to the Basin Plan, but Canberra refuses to consider the possibility that we know more now than we did in 2007 when the Commonwealth Water Act was created or in 2012 when the Basin Plan was adopted."

"Whenever there is a suggestion that there are problems with the Plan, the MDBA and the Commonwealth doubles down and says it must be implemented in full - ignoring what was originally intended."

"The Water Act sets out a detailed process for amending the Plan to incorporate practical learnings. It is critical the Basin Plan be adapted now to ensure agriculture can have some certainty and look ahead," Mr Anderson said.

Mr Anderson also expressed disappointment with media comments made today by the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) threatening further water buybacks if it believed states could not meet Basin Plan targets.

"Threatening buybacks, just undermines confidence."

"The Productivity Commission told us two years ago these timeframes are unrealistic – it's time to start listening," Mr Anderson said.

"To have confidence and to invest, farmers need to know the 450GL and buybacks in the Southern Basin are off the table."

"The Ministerial Council must acknowledge this and adapt the Plan accordingly."

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Mr Anderson said the VFF was expecting to see the Commonwealth and state governments work together to bring about meaningful change to the Basin Plan in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We need real adaptive management, not lip service. We need certainty that these issues are addressed once and for all in legislation.”

“Environmental outcomes need to move beyond just increasing water flows. The Basin Plan must adapt to acknowledge other environmental outcomes. Aquatic life, vegetation structure of our riverbanks are just as important as increased flows,” Mr Anderson said.

“The VFF is urging for a greater focus on the Northern Basin, that still only meter 30% of water use and a restructure of the MDBA.”

“The message is simple. Farmers need confidence and certainty to grow their businesses and create the jobs our country desperately needs. We can only gain this certainty and grow agriculture if the Basin Plan adapts,” Mr Anderson concluded.

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