

# Murray-Darling irrigation and agricultural production are critical

[Food & Environment](#) and [Water](#) | [Alan Moran](#)  
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Under Labor, Victorian water policy had an urban-orientation. Its focus was on reducing city usage and providing more water to Melbourne without building new dams.

That is set to change with new Liberal Premier Ted Baillieu having appointed National MP Peter Walsh the minister in charge of water and agriculture.

Agriculture is where the key issues lie. Despite all the political attention that brought wasteful spending on the Wonthaggi desalination plant and the Sugarloaf pipeline, irrigation accounts for 85 per cent of water use.

And irrigation issues are vital to the half of Victoria that is located in the Murray-Darling Basin, where almost 40 per cent of Australia's agricultural output is produced.

The recent drought brought calls to "save the Murray" from irrigation, which was said to be causing widespread "stress" on the Basin's natural ecology.

Irrigators take around half of the Basin's water.

Delivering this has entailed controlling the river system that previously alternated between floods and trickles.

Dams, levies and channel deepening now mean a continuous, relatively even flow to the benefit of farmers, recreational users and local communities.

Environmental activists, many of whom fundamentally oppose using modern agriculture, are calling for a 37 per cent reduction in irrigators' allowable water use.

The Federal Government has legislation which appears to support this.

The controversy of this is clear from angry meetings of communities in the Basin when its implications were first aired, and this week's resignation of Mike Taylor, the chairman of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

Nobody has specified the costs and benefits of reducing irrigation use.

A report by the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia argued we would gain from reducing the Murray-Darling's water for irrigation if we prioritised the water for growing fruits and nuts.

This misunderstands the unevenness of Australia's rainfall, which brings a massive variability of the river's flows, severely limiting its capacity to underpin the very high security water needed for such crops.

Former Australian of the Year Tim Flannery also has called for greater environmental flows.

He said this was affordable, pointing out that the Basin's agricultural earnings last year were higher

in spite of drought-constrained water availability.

But the higher earnings were because of higher world food prices, and price falls invariably follow good prices.

The World Wildlife Fund argues that the region might benefit if, in return for water licences, it got a \$9 billion taxpayer handout.

But somebody must pay for taxpayer handouts, which are poor substitutes for productive activities like growing food.

Moreover, even the WWF has recognised the river's resilience in quickly recovering from drought following the recent rains.

Australia's climatic extremes mean the natural condition of the Murray-Darling is to be "stressed", even if half its water was not used for irrigation.

Like the Nile and the Mississippi, it is a working river critical to the nation's agricultural output.

Taking water from farmers would reduce agricultural production, harming many regional centres that depend on it.

And few would see advantages in returning the river system to its natural highly variable flow rate.

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