

State's water split remains a dam shame

[Food & Environment](#) | [Alan Moran](#)
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Ideological aversion to dams in the state government's first bloom meant cancelling the proposed Mitchell Basin dam.

The drought has meant the inevitable outcome of water shortage has bitten earlier and more savagely.

And requirements for increased environmental flows have exacerbated this.

Victoria needs a major water source to insure against a repetition of the current rationing. Green activists still resist the cheapest solution, new dams, but there are sensible options for new sources of water, especially in East Gippsland.

These include tapping run-off from sudden deluges -- and there have been two this year. This has additional flood mitigation benefits.

However, it would take more than five years before a new dam delivered more urban water. The same is true for the horrendously expensive desalination proposal.

In the interim, water must be bought from existing rights owners or ``created" by saving water that evaporates or is otherwise lost.

The Victorian Government believes the leaky Murray irrigation system offers scope for water savings equivalent to a new dam. It has proposed funding engineering works with the savings split between environmental flows, farmers and urban uses.

Melbourne gets 75,000 megalitres, about 15 per cent of current consumption, which is to be piped through the planned Sugarloaf Interconnector.

The rural lobby opposes water being moved to Melbourne from country areas. The logic of that opposition makes no sense. It's as if the urban community were to oppose city based accountants selling their services in the bush.

Rural opposition to diverting water to Melbourne would be justified if this entailed forcing irrigators to sell. It would also have merit if water bought from irrigators for urban areas was assigned a higher security. The flip-side of this is less security and diminished rural water value for rural water users.

Government has made assurances on these matters but farmers mistrust them. They are also sceptical about water savings claims.

Moreover, some of the Sugarloaf scheme's savings are from better metering to reduce overallocation. Farmers consider that water to be legitimately theirs. This aside, genuine savings can be made. And many farmers can economise on water use or shift into less water intensive production.

They will sell their saved water -- at the right price. Indeed, Elders is offering to sell 62,000 megalitres from irrigators, which could even be a source for Victorian urban supplies.

Trading in water, like trading in whisky, is all about price and quality.

The State Government's Sugarloaf Pipeline proposal would provide back-up supplies for Melbourne until major new sources are arranged. And Victorian irrigators appear to get benefits at little cost.

The State Government has said it will not take water unless it makes savings. It could also assure farmers that Melbourne will not get a higher priority and provide compensation if planned savings fall short.

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