

MEDIA RELEASE

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Seven Murray Darling Basin Mayors call for urgent meeting with Ministers on Buy Back compensation.

The Mayors of the seven Councils representing Victoria's Murray-Darling Basin irrigation communities, have today joined forces to urgently call on the Victorian Government to pause, and rethink its approach to the Basin Sustainable Communities Fund.

In a united stand, the Murray River Group of Councils (MRGC) and Greater Shepparton City Council are calling for genuine partnership with local communities to get the investment right.

The Commonwealth established the Sustainable Communities Fund to help communities adjust to the social and economic impacts of Buy Backs under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

The Fund is intended to support community resilience, economic diversification and locally-led transition through place-based investment and genuine co-design with local communities.

The MRGC emphasise that they welcome Victoria's decision to accept the funding and are not seeking to delay investment. They are seeking to improve it.

The Mayors of the seven councils have unanimously called on the Victorian Government to suspend the current funding negotiations and establish a collaborative planning process with Local Government to develop a tailored implementation plan for each Basin municipality.

The Councils cover over one fifth of the state and represent some 240,000 Victorians. The region produces over \$10 billion in food production annually with one in four people employed in agriculture or food manufacturing.

The Commonwealth's water buy backs have so far resulted in the loss nearly 2000 jobs and up to \$550 million in farm gate losses annually. The MRGC point out that these impacts have been unevenly distributed and are cumulative, affecting different communities in different ways.

Chair of the Murray River Group of Councils, Cr Stuart King said Local Government stands ready to work alongside the Victorian Government, to deliver the best possible outcomes for the region from this once-in-a-generation investment.

"This funding is too important to get wrong."

"Every one of our communities has been affected differently by water recovery. Each has its own industries, strengths and opportunities. That is why we need to co-design individual responses.

"We have been asking for a seat at the table to strengthen project design and delivery since the Victorian Government agreed to accept the funding last year.

"Local government understands its communities best of all the levels of Government. We know where the opportunities exist, where the challenges lie and what investments will deliver meaningful long-term economic and social benefits," Cr Stuart King said.

The councils are proposing a collaborative process to assess the impacts of water recovery in each municipality and identify the highest-value local investment opportunities before developing tailored implementation plans for each community.

"We have submitted multiple requests for an urgent meeting with Minister Shing and Minister Settle to discuss our proposal and are hoping for a positive response by the end of this week," said Cr King.

Cr King went on to say that the MRGC proposal reflected the very principles on which the Commonwealth established the Sustainable Communities Fund.

"The Commonwealth's principles for the Fund emphasise place-based investment directed to impacted communities, co-design and evidence-based decision making."

"We agree with Victoria that the money is nowhere near sufficient to repair all the damage Buy Backs have done. That is what makes it critical that we spend it well.

"Our proposal gives Victoria the opportunity to fully deliver on the principles, and ensure funding decisions are informed by the communities they intend to support," said Cr King

"We strongly believe this is a better way: pause, take the time to engage with Local Government, get the investment right. The Victorian Government knows Buy Backs continue to devastate our region. This funding can help but only if we take the time to work together to invest it right," said Cr King.

The councils said they are strongly committed to working constructively with the Victorian Government.

"This isn't about politics," Cr King said.

"It's about ensuring every dollar invested delivers a stronger regional economy, stronger communities and a stronger future for northern Victoria," Cr King concluded.

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