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### **Conservation Council SA submission to the Murray Darling Basin Royal Commission**

Conservation Council SA is South Australia's peak environment organisation, representing 90,000+ people in over 50 environment related community groups across SA. We are an independent, non-profit, non-government and non-party political organisation.

We have been campaigning for a healthy Murray-Darling system for over a decade, working with environmental, aboriginal, and farming organisations from across the Basin to ensure that the Murray-Darling Basin Plan delivers for environments and communities. As the state at the end of the system we have been particularly vigilant in ensuring that our precious and vulnerable river environments receive enough water. Successful delivery of the Basin Plan means the recovery of the full volume of environmental water, 3,200 GL, by 2024. This includes the 450 GL negotiated by South Australia as a condition of signing on to the Basin Plan.

Of late it appears that these delivery aims are slipping through our fingers. Water recovery has stalled at 2,106 GL, just under two thirds of the total. Reports of water theft and corruption have eroded faith that the Basin Plan will deliver the full volume of water so desperately needed.

Issues of over allocation and river degradation are being sidelined in a misguided attempt to cut recovery targets to protect communities. The ultimate protection for communities is a flourishing river system and a Basin Plan that delivers on its environmental objectives. By implementing the Basin Plan in full and on time, and ensuring that all associated projects are rigorously assessed, we can ensure environments are protected and communities have long term water security.

Conservation Council SA welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission. We endorse the submission made by Environment Victoria and provide the following dot points summarising our key concerns in relation to the Basin Plan.

- A Commonwealth judicial inquiry should be called as a matter of urgency to investigate potential corruption within the management of the Basin Plan and possible influence of vested interests on government policy and action.
- The projects currently recommended for the Sustainable Diversion Limits adjustment fail key tests and should not be allowed to proceed in their current form. Tests put forward by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists should be included in an amended Water Act to ensure the rigour of these projects. Implementation of the SDLs should be delayed to allow an effective adjustment that meets the objective of 'increased environmental outcomes.'

- Assessment of the socio-economic benefits of more water in rivers has been largely absent. Assessments of the impact of the 450GL up-water projects have focused almost exclusively on negative impacts on irrigators but ignore sectors other than irrigation. The economic and social benefits of healthy river systems are many and varied, particularly in relation to the tourism industry, recreation and well-being. Due to this lack of assessment the 450GL negotiated by South Australia is now under threat. Without delivery of this water the Basin Plan will not be delivered in full.
- Downstream extraction of environmental flows must be addressed as a matter of urgency. These flows must be protected as there is no substitute for real water in our rivers, for water quality and salt export amongst other important functions. The integrity of the Basin Plan is compromised as long as this extraction continues.
- The cap on buybacks should be lifted as they are much better value for money and more efficient than infrastructure projects. Previous buyback tenders have been well oversubscribed indicating that there is still potential to recover water in this manner.
- The effect of constraints on the delivery of water needs to be addressed. Jurisdictions have been slow to act on removal of constraints and this is a major barrier to restoring river health. Jurisdictions need to build community support for removing constraints by addressing concerns about minor flooding and highlighting the many benefits of removal.
- Despite significant investment in irrigation modernisation, a large percentage of irrigation channels still supply very small volumes of water. Rationalisation of these inefficient channels could deliver significant gains and result in less reliance on on-farm efficiency measures. Efficiency measures that reduce return flows should be avoided, and where that is not possible, any reduction in return flows must be accounted for and deducted from the water savings.

For further information regarding this submission please contact:

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