
MEDIA RELEASE

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RAMJO says \$430 million water buyback shows Basin communities are still being ignored

The Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation (RAMJO) has condemned the Federal Government's latest Murray-Darling Basin water purchase, saying the reported buyback of almost 86 gigalitres for more than \$430 million is another blow to food-producing communities across southern New South Wales.

RAMJO Chair Cr Ruth McRae OAM said the purchase shows the Commonwealth is still pursuing water recovery targets without properly accounting for the local and regional impacts on farming, food manufacturing, transport, service industries and towns.

"RAMJO supports healthy rivers and a healthy environment. What we do not support is a policy framework that continues to take productive water out of regional communities while treating socioeconomic impacts as an afterthought," Cr McRae said.

"The Basin Plan has been done to our communities, not with our communities. This latest buyback confirms that the Federal Government is still chasing numbers instead of delivering practical, place-based environmental outcomes."

RAMJO's Murray-Darling Basin Plan 2026 Review submission argues that water recovery by any means, including buybacks, rules changes and reductions in reliability, must stop immediately.

The submission says reducing the consumptive pool by 37 per cent in the southern connected Basin has already weakened the resilience of water-dependent industries, reduced production of staples such as rice and dairy, undermined irrigation districts, and caused flow-on impacts to food processing, transport, farm services and local jobs.

Cr McRae said the latest purchase would further reduce confidence in communities already carrying a disproportionate share of Basin Plan adjustment.

"Every gigalitre removed from productive use has consequences. It affects what farmers can plant, what processors can source, what transport operators can move, and whether small towns can retain jobs, services, schools, sporting clubs and young families," Cr McRae said.

"Communities in the Riverina and NSW Murray are not opposed to environmental outcomes. We are opposed to blunt buybacks that damage local economies while failing to solve the real environmental constraints."

RAMJO says the Commonwealth should immediately redirect remaining water recovery funding to collaborative environmental projects that deliver measurable outcomes, including floodplain and wetland works, fish passage, carp control, modern fish screens, riparian restoration and integrated catchment management.

Cr McRae said the Government's own approach needed to shift away from headline volumes and toward practical ecological outcomes.

"The problem is not simply the volume of water held by the Commonwealth. The real barriers are constraints on getting environmental water onto floodplains and wetlands, invasive species such as carp, degraded habitat, cold water pollution and poor fish passage," she said.

"Buying more water does not fix those problems. Working with councils, landholders, irrigation companies and communities can."

RAMJO also said the Federal Government’s \$300 million Sustainable Communities Program is grossly inadequate compared with the economic risks created by continued water recovery.

“Our communities are being asked to absorb long-term structural change for the benefit of a national policy objective, but the support on the table does not come close to the scale of the impact,” Cr McRae said.

“Before any further water recovery proceeds, there must be comprehensive local and regional socioeconomic assessment. Unless impacts are neutral, or knowingly accepted by the affected community, implementation should not proceed.”

RAMJO is calling on the Federal Government to:

- immediately cease further water recovery by any means, including buybacks and rules changes;
- redirect remaining water recovery funding to practical environmental works and community support;
- undertake genuine local and regional socioeconomic impact assessment before further Basin Plan decisions are made;
- give local government a formal seat at the Basin Ministerial Council table;
- move from volumetric water recovery targets to place-based ecological outcomes; and
- work with Basin communities as partners, not as policy casualties.

“The Riverina and Murray are the food bowl of NSW. These communities have helped build the nation’s food security, export strength and regional economy,” Cr McRae said.

“They deserve better than another round of buybacks that drains confidence, reduces productive capacity and ignores local knowledge.”

“The Federal Government must stop buying water, start listening to Basin communities, and invest in environmental outcomes that actually work.”

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