



## **Media Statement follow ABC News story on NSW Healthy Floodplains program**

**27 May 2018**

The Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association (GVIA) represents irrigation entitlement holders in the Gwydir Valley, which is also the pilot valley for the implementation of the NSW Healthy Floodplains Program<sup>1</sup> (“the program”) and believes the community are entitled to additional facts about the program in our valley, not represented by the ABC News story aired on Sunday evening at 7pm, 27 May 2018 and their associated online media reports<sup>2</sup>.

Water is precious and when its increasingly scarce, like during our current drought, sensationalised stories do little to inform discussion and establish balanced opinion. The ABC chose to present such a story, which included misleading and false claims. Examples of areas of concern are provided at the end of this statement.

Irrigators in our region have been legitimately accessing overbank flows that spill out from our terminal river system (the Gwydir River) and its branches since irrigation development. This form of access is not new, and any entitlement and subsequent allocations provided through the implementation of the Healthy Floodplains program are already estimated as historical take<sup>3</sup>.

The program will bring about this legitimate form of access into the current licencing framework ensuring consistency with national reform programs like the National Water Initiative signed in 2004 and the *Murray Darling Basin Plan 2012*. Implementation will protect outcomes under the Basin Plan not detract from them.

Its implementation will provide industry, the environment and any downstream users and communities certainty into the future. It does this by providing irrigators security of access (at a historical level of take) and by restricting future growth which will maintain or improve floodplain flows downstream, including to any environmental assets. This is particularly relevant in the Gwydir Valley, where our river system historically terminated at the internationally significant Gwydir Wetlands.

Growth will be limited via a three-fold compliance approach through the measurement and reporting of take by individuals (new), in addition to the monitoring of valley-wide take within

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<sup>1</sup> The Healthy floodplains program funded by the Commonwealth Government provided NSW Government the opportunity to fast-track the implementation of the floodplains policy that was first instigated during the development of water sharing plans in 2000 but never incorporated. See more on the program via <http://www.water.nsw.gov.au/water-management/water-recovery-old/sustaining-the-basin/healthy-floodplains>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-27/murray-darling:-state-plan-to-give-irrigators-water-free-for-all/9763106?pfmredir=sm>

<sup>3</sup> Estimates form part of Murray Darling Basin Ministerial Cap Limits (set in 1994), NSW Water Sharing Plan Limits (set in 2004 and updated in 2016) and Murray Darling Basin Plan Baseline Diversion Limits (referenced at 2009 and set in 2012).

valley-limits (currently estimated) and the compliance of floodplain structures to standardised floodplain management plans<sup>4</sup>.

The GVIA provided background information to the ABC to assist, as best we could, on helping them prepare a factual and balanced report. We provided this information based on our intimate knowledge of the program being piloted in our valley and our knowledge of the important role floods have to our environment and our communities.

Unfortunately, the ABC stories and following debate highlights that floodplain access is not well understood. The ABC chose to present a sensationalised story, which included some mis-leading and false claims that we believe require addressing, these are:

- **State plan to give irrigators water 'free-for-all' could threaten wetlands**
  - In the Gwydir Valley, the draft results from the implementation of the program are proposed to reduce valley wide access of irrigators by up to 9-15%<sup>5</sup> to ensure access remains within required regulatory limits<sup>3</sup>. Any additional flows will flow downstream including to environmental assets as in the Gwydir with our terminal Wetlands.
  - Regulation by volumetric limits at an individual and valley level, and through compliance of floodplain works will provide the NSW Government a three-pronged compliance approach to enable monitoring and sharing of floodplain flows as opposed to the two-step approach including valley estimates used today.
- **Massive amounts of water are being taken through a loop hole and taking water out of rivers in the basin requires a licence, but currently, when that water spills out over land during floods in NSW, it has been free for the taking**
  - The water take is legitimate under NSW legislation including the *Water Act 1912* and the *Water Management Act 2000* as provisioned in NSW Water Sharing Plans<sup>6</sup>.
  - The program will allow for this legitimate form of access to be incorporated volumetrically into the current licencing framework ensuring consistency with national reform programs like the National Water Initiative signed in 2004 and the *Murray Darling Basin Plan 2012*.
- **Those who are taking the most get the biggest licence share**
  - Licence and shares are determined with two key inputs:
    1. Water volumes are determined as the long-term average of water take that could be accessed through infrastructure in-place in 2000 when NSW Water Sharing Plans were initiated.
    2. An irrigators share of that licence is determined from the long-term average of water take from infrastructure that existed in 2008, when the NSW Government embargoed floodplain work development.
  - Licencing is incorporating historical access based on the above into the licencing framework, not new access or any future access and therefore those with legitimate infrastructure and historical opportunity, are likely to get the largest share of a defined volume.

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<sup>4</sup> The Floodplain Management Plan for the Gwydir Valley Floodplain was gazetted in 2016 and incorporated individual sub-catchment plans into the one standardised document.

<https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/#/view/regulation/2016/509>

<sup>5</sup> Page 10 of NSW Water Reform Consultation Paper on Floodplain Harvesting paper

[https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/145427/floodplain-harvesting-policy-consultation-paper.pdf](https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/145427/floodplain-harvesting-policy-consultation-paper.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Gwydir River Regulated Water Sharing Plan 2016 (replaced the 2004).

- All shares are within regulatory limits imposed by NSW Water Sharing Plan<sup>6</sup> and the Murray Darling Basin Plan requirements.
- The establishment of individual licenced entitlements that can be measured are a foundation requirement of the National Water Initiative of which NSW remains a signatory.
- **In the Gwydir Valley alone, the Government estimates there is currently more than 600 gigalitres of water storage — that is more than all the water in Sydney Harbour**
  - New information was gathered during the implementation of the program which provided updated data on current farm storage capacity, pump capacity and areas of development that was poorly documented in earlier models<sup>7</sup>.
  - This information i.e. the total on-farm storage capacity is not understood to reflect potential licences, rather licences are calculated on a long-term average take calculated over the climatic data-set using infrastructure capacity as of 2000.
  - On-farm storage development was encouraged Gwydir Valley to address system and operational constraints in the valley as well reflecting that more than 50% of long-term average river flows are generated below Copeton Dam, these unregulated flows are known as supplementary events and are shared between the environment and users. Supplementary events are sporadic and unpredictable but form an important part of water portfolios in the region and infrastructure was developed to meet this opportunity.
- **This will have a negative impact on other states...they should be worried**
  - The implementation of the Healthy Floodplain program aims to ensure volumes of irrigation take remain within regulatory limits. Therefore, implementation will either maintain or improve downstream flows, not diminish them and will provide greater security to all users on how water is shared into the future.
  - The Gwydir Valley is an inland delta system with limited stream connectivity to downstream catchments, historically all water flowed across the floodplain towards the Gwydir Wetlands. In large flooding events, water will flow across the floodplains and can provide floodplain connectivity to downstream areas. These events as in 2011 and 2012, whereby nearly 1,000,000 megalitres of water flows were measured are largely not impacted by irrigators, who have a fixed and limited capacity to intercept and store water.
- **Irrigators will make more money (from being able to trade licences)**
  - Irrigators in principle do not support the trading of floodplain licences as the opportunity of access is inherent to the farm location and development. However, tradability is a fundamental principle of the National Water Initiative and therefore, must be addressed by NSW to remain consistent.
  - Irrigators in our region will only support the trade of future floodplain licences if appropriate decommissioning has occurred, so that ability to access is proportionally reduced to the trade volume.
- **Can't run a system without knowing how much storage and how much is being taken**
  - The NSW Government is implementing the program, so that it can have better knowledge and improve regulation on floodplain flow sharing.

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<sup>7</sup> The updated information is available for the Gwydir Valley, in the Floodplain harvesting consultation paper on page 14 [https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/145427/floodplain-harvesting-policy-consultation-paper.pdf](https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/145427/floodplain-harvesting-policy-consultation-paper.pdf).

- The program has occurred over many stages with the issuing of licences based on long-term average analysis being the final stage, whereby the volume of take is to be determined but is yet to be completed.
- To determine these numbers, the NSW Government embarked on a farm-scale upgrade of valley based hydrological modelling data which has resulted in detailed data collection of on-farm infrastructure size and capability, fine scale mapping and current irrigation water use behaviour.
- This has resulted new information about the historical and current on-farm capacity and average water take for all forms of water not just floodplain.
- This has also resulted in over 100 individual farm inspections on irrigated and non-irrigated land to review floodplain works, with any illegitimate works now being amended.

For more information on the Gwydir Valley, the history of water reform and other policy areas please see our website [www.gvia.org.au](http://www.gvia.org.au)