

Water Buy Back only part of Murray solution: broad development strategy needed

Ross Womersley, Executive Director of the South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) has welcomed a renewed focus on the chronic challenges facing the Murray River and people living throughout the MDB. However he expressed concern about the narrowness of the current policy debate, and said that investment in broader economic re-development was also needed.

Womersley said “Both major parties’ policy announcements acknowledge the needs of irrigators along river; however we do not as yet see policy that looks beyond irrigators to the broader local community.”

“Amidst all the discussion of the interests of irrigators, the thousands of other people who live in river communities are also experiencing serious hardship. SACOSS believes those people are just as entitled to support. We are persuaded by the arguments raised in the recent report from the highly respected Wentworth Group of Scientists that buy-backs should be based on a reasonable return to irrigators which if agreed, would enable already allocated funds to be used to create an investment fund for the broader economic redevelopment of local Riverland communities.”

SACOSS is aware that the resilience of Riverland communities whose has been eroded by years of drought and they now find themselves increasingly divided or enveloped by chronic depression and hopelessness.

Womersley said: “We are particularly concerned that all of the discussion currently seems to focus on the needs and interests of irrigators. Clearly there are many other people living throughout our Riverland communities who are suffering although their needs and interests are barely acknowledged. We know of increasing numbers of Riverland families who are experiencing deep hardship and who will receive nothing from water buy-backs. We hear stories of large increases in children arriving at school and not having had breakfast as families struggle to manage on extremely limited finances. We are told of increasing rates of domestic violence and mental and stress related health issues amidst local Riverland communities”

“Of most concern to SACOSS is that the major party policies will increasingly divide the communities – on one hand the irrigators with likely financial support; on the other the local shop owner whose business is simply draining away.”

Womersley noted: “This is a crucial time for members of Riverland communities. Truly effective policy needs to help and support community members to unite in their efforts to focus on how to re-build thriving river communities – not reward some and simply ignore the needs of others.”

**For further comment, please contact
Ross Womersley SACOSS Executive Director 0418 805 426**

More information is available from

<http://www.wentworthgroup.org/blueprints/sustainable-diversions-in-the-murray-darling-basin>