

Scientist urges rethink of Murray-Darling plan

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Reporter: Kerry O'Brien

One of the nation's most eminent water scientists is saying the priorities of the \$10 billion plan to save the Murray-Darling system need to be rethought and implemented with greater urgency.

Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN: The Rudd Government's biggest test on water is going to be how effectively it implements the \$10 billion plan to save the crucially important Murray-Darling system, a plan introduced by John Howard but endorsed by his victor.

But now one of the nation's most eminent water scientists is saying the priorities of that plan need to be rethought and implemented with greater urgency. Professor Peter Cullen is a leader of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists who have led debate on the water crisis.

In a speech scheduled for a conference in Launceston tomorrow, Professor Cullen says farmers have been deluded about how much water is available, and urges a big buy-up of water licences from farmers along the Murray.

I spoke with Professor Cullen in a Canberra studio earlier today.

Peter Cullen, most Australians would probably believe that we now have a national water plan to resolve the crisis in the Murray-Darling basin at least and all we have to do is wait for it to be implemented but I don't think you quite see it that way, do you?

PETER CULLEN, NATIONAL WATER COMMISSIONER: We're not quite that way yet. We've got the framework for a plan that will take us forward but there are still some critical decisions. We've got to work out how much water can we take from the rivers and still have a healthy river. Governments have been committing to do that since the 1984 reforms but haven't really done it yet. Then we've got to work out how we share that water between the competing users. All the farmers would like to have access to it, cities are now wanting to delve into it. So whilst we have the framework in the new bill and a

commitment to develop a Murray-Darling Basin plan, we've got a fair bit of detail still to work through.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Under the Howard \$10 billion plan most of the money was to go to cutting back water wastage with more infrastructure but you see a different priority, why?

PETER CULLEN: I mean I think we've been building quite a lot of infrastructure and we haven't necessarily been getting the water savings that we've been expecting and if you listen to the arguments going on in the food bowl in Victoria farmers are arguing some of those savings aren't as big as imagined.

I think we should fix the problem. We've got a situation where the inflow into the Murray are perhaps dropped about 40 per cent over the last decade and that really means, I think we've got to reduce the entitlements and I don't think we've been getting very far over the last decade by incremental improvement in the system and I think it's now time to accept the reality that we are in a dryer climate in the Murray-Darling basin and reduce the entitlements appropriately probably by 40, 50 per cent and compensate people who we are taking licences away from. So I would give that a priority for the money.

KERRY O'BRIEN: When you talk about reducing the water allocations by up to 50 per cent, that would dramatically change the farming landscape in the basin, wouldn't it?

PETER CULLEN: I think we are going to see a lot of changes and I think it's important that the whole irrigation community thinks about those changes so that when we do spend money on infrastructure we spend it to build an irrigation system that will give us a 21st century wealth creating water efficient irrigation system rather than just repair some of the broken down infrastructure of the last century. So I've been trying to think about how will that farming be. I think farms might be bigger, farms will probably grow, have a portfolio of crops and anyway will have a mixture of permanent plantings and annual and when they know how much water they've got available they'll make decisions to plant annual crops like rice, cotton or pastures of various sorts. For their permanent water they will use it where they can on permanent plantings like grapes and olive and so on.

So I think there will be a change in the mix of the sort of plants. I think we're going to see a lifting of the quality of infrastructure to deliver water, no one wants to waste it. We're going to see more technology in terms of automatic sensors that tell irrigators when the plant needs water and perhaps do it automatically.

KERRY O'BRIEN: How will that impact on food production from Australia's most important food bowl?

PETER CULLEN: Well I mean I think food production has been under great stress over the last five or 10 years with the reduction in water. I believe we can double the production from a lot of our current irrigation, perhaps with half the amount of water. We will be able to maintain food production but we will be changing the way we do our farming.

KERRY O'BRIEN: You've made the depressing observation that many iconic rivers and wetland systems have been irreversibly degraded. Does that mean, for instance, that the Murray-River can never be brought back to what it was?

PETER CULLEN: Well, the Murray has suffered some pretty serious damage. We've lost a lot of red gums in the lower Murray flood plain and I doubt that they will be back. They need a sequence of floods, they need to get the grazing pressure off them for a sustained period. We've got the Coorong now with parts of it in hyper-saline, so the salinity is above the sea level. It's rapidly becoming like parts of Red Sea. We've now got some of the wetlands that we've allowed to dry out in the Murray-Darling Basin, putting acid into the river and that's having impact on vegetation downstream from them. So some of those impacts I believe are irreversible but what's important is that we slow them and we stop them getting worse and I think that's what we're trying to do with the idea of sustainable levels of extraction. Keeping enough water in the river to stop that stuff getting worse.

KERRY O'BRIEN: So in essence, do you believe the Rudd Government should move very quickly, bite the political bullet and adopt a very substantial program for buy back water allocations from farmers?

PETER CULLEN: I think that's right. I mean I think there's \$10 billion available, we've got a government committed to fixing this problem and I think we've now got to find straight forward ways for them to just get on and do it.

KERRY O'BRIEN: You've proposed a new independent authority to manage the water allocations in the same way that the Reserve Bank now manages interest rates so I imagine that would go down like a lead balloon with farmers?

PETER CULLEN: The issue is the entitlements that farmers have, and I've been talking about buying back, are sort of like shares. The seasonal allocations are like the dividend every year and companies declare a dividend based on what sort of resources they've got available to pay it. We need to make sure that our seasonal allocations to farmers are appropriate for what's in the system.

Over the last 10 years by denying the climate shift we're in, we've run the storages in the Murray-Darling down to virtually nothing and the middle of this year they're looking like being even worse than the middle of last year and so we need to be making conservative allocations against the, those entitlements so we don't drain the system totally. We keep some water up our sleeve for the towns and the cities dependent on the Murray and then allocate what's a reasonable amount to the farmers. They would also like more but it's a constrained resource.

KERRY O'BRIEN: The Prime Minister has already set some benchmark, so targets across a range of policy areas. Do you think it's a good idea that he should also set similar benchmarks and targets in this area to make sure that action is taken urgently?

PETER CULLEN: Well, there are a lot of benchmarks. They've been established in the National Water Initiative, that the Prime Minister and premiers have signed off on.

KERRY O'BRIEN: But they haven't been met have they?

PETER CULLEN: There's been some slippage in the time and so I think the challenge now is to get become on to that timetable and given the importance of the climate shift we probably need to accelerate that timetable but we do have the framework for the timetable, we just need a commitment to get on and do those thing.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Peter Cullen thanks for talking with us.

PETER CULLEN: Thanks, Kerry.