

Pipeline foes label stage 1 restrictions a bribe

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February 24, 2008

The Age, Sunday 24 Feb 2008

Opponents of the north-south pipe have accused Goulburn Valley Water of cynically lifting water restrictions to curry favour over the proposal.

Even though inflows into Lake Eildon in the year to last July were their lowest for 115 years — and continued to be very low afterwards — restrictions were lifted from stage 4 to stage 1 by October, and have stayed there since. Lake Eildon is the major source of water for the region.

Shepparton, Seymour, Molesworth and Alexandra are some of the towns whose restrictions were lifted.

The north-south pipe will take water from the Goulburn River and pipe it down to Melbourne.

Chris Healy, a councillor with Murrindindi Shire, said he and other opponents of the north-south pipe were appalled by Goulburn Valley Water's "cynical exercise".

"We were on stage 4, and with all this kerfuffle about sending the water to Melbourne along the pipeline, it's gone down to stage 1," he said.

Goulburn Valley's justification — that inflows into Lake Eildon last winter and spring could justify the easing of restrictions — "was just a bit of nonsense that they put out".

Mr Healy said that when work started on the pipe last year, towns in the region were on more severe restrictions (4) than Melbourne (3a).

"Why would you send water from someone who's on stage 4 to someone who's on stage 3a? — within a couple of months we were back on stage 1," he said. "If you looked at a map of Victoria, this Goulburn Valley area is the only area that's on stage 1." Mr Healy said he suspected the State Government's hand behind the move.

The manager of operations at Goulburn Valley Water, Bruce Anderson, said the allegations of currying favour were "absolute rubbish".

Mr Anderson conceded that flows into Lake Eildon had been extremely low in 2006 and 2007, and that restrictions had been eased suddenly from stage 4 to stage 2 in September 2007 and then to stage 1 in October. But he pointed out that it was not the first time the towns had been on stage 1 restrictions in this dry period.

"The reduction in restrictions was based solely on the water resource position and was not influenced in any way by Government decisions on pipelines to Melbourne from the Goulburn River," he said.

Graeme Hannan, Goulburn Murray Water's manager of planning, agreed inflows into Lake Eildon were low. "We've got data going back 115 years, and the inflows from the middle of 2006 to the middle of 2007 were the lowest on record by a long margin."