



Mr Sam Birrell MP
Federal Member for Nicholls

MEDIA RELEASE

Tuesday, March 21, 2023,

Birrell's motion to stop damaging water buybacks

Federal Member for Nicholls, Sam Birrell, has led a blistering attack on the Albanese Government's plan to use damaging water buybacks to complete the Murray-Darling Basin Plan which he told Parliament will wreak social and economic damage across regional communities.

Mr Birrell was joined in his passionate defence of irrigation communities by Nationals Leader, David Littleproud, South Australian Liberal MP, Tony Pasin and NSW Nationals MP, Mark Coulton who's electorate of Parkes contains a third of the Basin.

Mr Birrell's Private Members motion called on the Government to extend the timeline for completion of the Murray-Darling Basin plan and work with Basin communities on projects to recover further water for the environment in a manner that has a neutral or positive socio-economic impact.

"The Labor Government's current approach to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan poses an existential crisis to what has been one of the great food bowls of Australia," Mr Birrell said.

"When water leaves an area, so does the economy that that water creates."

"If a farmer sells a water licence back to the government, the farmer may well be compensated, but the milk or fruit that the farmer once grew, grows no longer, and the employed in the supply chain that gets the product to the consumer is no longer employed, and our nation is poorer in so many ways," he said.

Mr Birrell said an additional 450GL was an add on to the plan, agreed in 2018 on the basis that any recovery met a social and economic neutrality test.

"A deal is a deal," Mr Birrell said.

"I understand that any further removal of water will have devastating effects on basin communities: economic destruction, significantly reduced production and damaged export markets."

"That's the exact opposite of socioeconomic neutrality."

"There is also strong evidence that trying to push this amount of extra water down the river system will have terrible environmental impacts," he said.

Nationals Leader David Littleproud, also a former Water Minister, said communities face "unnecessary trauma" if buybacks proceed.

"Buybacks rip away communities, Mr Littleproud said.

"It's not the farmers you have to worry about."

"They put the money in their pocket and they go away."

“It's the communities that are left there to support them—it's the machinery dealer, it's the local pump shop, it's the local cafe and it's the local hairdresser.”

“They are the real human toll of what this plan would be, particularly if this government will not give certainty to the states around allowing them an extension of time to finish those efficiency programs,” he told Parliament.

Tony Pasin MP took aim at the South Australian Labor MPs who formed a conga line to speak against the motion.

“Less water available for production means higher prices for what water remains on the market, and lower production means higher prices in our shops,” Mr Pasin said.

“It beggars’ belief that, in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, Labor would seek to implement policies to effectively place an environmental tax on basic food production.”

Mr Pasin said South Australia’s contribution to the 45GI is the equivalent of shutting down all of Renmark and turning it into wasteland.

“Labor seems hellbent on pursuing an ideological crusade, and it's at the expense of local jobs, local communities and the next generation of irrigators and farmers, who will be priced out of the industry, all the while pushing us into food insecurity.”

“Shame on you!” Mr Pasin said.

Member for Parkes, Mark Coulton, said Collarenebri, Warren and Bourke are amongst the towns in his electorate that lost jobs, industry, and population in the last round of “indiscriminate” buybacks.

“Those communities are shuddering and waiting for the next round of buybacks,” Mr Coulton said.

Mr Birrell said people in his electorate can’t understand why the Albanese Government is ignoring the obvious and predictable negative impacts on their communities from water buybacks.

“People in the Goulburn Valley pose this question to me:

‘Sam, we work so hard.’

‘We grow cheap, clean, and healthy food for the nation. We've created export markets that benefit so many people, creating wealth and jobs. Why do they hate us so much?’

‘Why would they jeopardise our future by taking away more water when they know it would hurt us?’

‘They don't understand the environment here, they don't understand our economy, and they make no effort.’

‘Why won't they acknowledge that the deal was that extra water could be taken only if it didn't damage our communities? Why don't they understand that a deal is a deal?’”

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NOTE: a copy of the motion mover by the Federal member for Nicholls Sam Birrell is attached.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS – Murray-Darling Basin

I move that this House:

(1) notes that:

(a) the October 2022 budget contained an undisclosed amount intended for water buybacks in the Murray-Darling Basin, and that confirmation of the Government's intention to recommence buybacks has already had an impact on the water market;

(b) the country's largest water broker, Adelaide-based Waterfind, issued and then withdrew, an expression of interest for Commonwealth buybacks;

(c) water entitlement holders have withdrawn from the market to wait for the expected premium when the Government enters the market;

(d) a 2018 agreement reached by Australia's water ministers guarantees that positive, or neutral, socio-economic outcomes must be demonstrated for approval of any further recovery of Murray-Darling Basin environmental water;

(e) the Government is ignoring expert reports and is pursuing a timeline for completion of the Murray-Darling Basin plan and buybacks which will cause economic and social harm in Basin communities; and

(f) the Government is ignoring former Prime Minister Julia Gillard's stated position on the additional 450 gegalitres when she announced with the then Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, that it would only be recovered via water recovery projects that minimise the impact on communities, to ensure there is no social and economic downside for communities;

(2) acknowledges that Murray-Darling Basin communities have already done the heavy lifting on the recovery of water for the environment and any further recovery should be done in a manner that does not deliver more social and economic harm to those communities; and

(3) calls on the Government to extend the timeline for completion of the Murray-Darling Basin plan and work with Basin communities on projects to recover further water for the environment in a manner that has a neutral or positive socio-economic impact.