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MEDIA RELEASE

MDA Backs calls for an Independent Public Inquiry into Basin Plan

The Murray Darling Association has added the voice of local government to calls from the states including South Australia and Victoria for an independent public inquiry. The call, agreed unanimously by all MDA regions from Queensland to SA follows recent allegations of water misappropriation, and possible irregularities in the state-based regulations governing water use in the Northern Basin.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has asked the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to consider conducting a Basin-wide compliance review, with findings to be presented to the Council of Australian Governments by December 15.

But Murray Darling Association national president David Thurley has expressed concern the MDBA wouldn't be sufficiently empowered to conduct a review, saying the MDA favoured an independent public inquiry.

"The Murray-Darling Basin Authority has a complex role, and one that the community must have confidence in for the Basin Plan to succeed," he said. "That role includes responsibility for Basin-wide water resource planning."

"The Murray-Darling Basin Authority was not implicated in the current issues raised by Four Corners, with allegations raised in the report all issues for which the NSW Government has responsibility. However, it will be essential that any inquiry is able to independently distinguish and report on these responsibilities. For this reason, we feel that to call on the MDBA to conduct the enquiry would be unfair to the authority."

He said that a review by the MDBA could be seen as lacking independence, and could undermine community confidence in the Basin Plan.

An independent public inquiry would undertake a Basin-wide investigation into compliance and enforcement. It would have the power to compel witnesses to give evidence, with recommendations to be considered by the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council and then put before COAG.

Cr Thurley said the MDA firmly believed any inquiry should not interfere in a list of projects designed to deliver up to 650 gegalitres of offsets needed to satisfy the Basin Plan's water recovery target.

The Victorian Government has also called for a special Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council meeting to be convened as soon as practicable to address the allegations of non-compliance.

With over 167 councils within and reliant on the Murray-Darling Basin there are increasing calls for their peak body, the MDA to be given a seat on the Ministerial Council.

MDA chief executive officer Emma Bradbury said that it will be essential for all governments to continue to work together. "Local government, as the third level of government in Australia has invaluable local

knowledge and technical expertise. This detailed knowledge of our local communities is essential to supporting informed decision making, and ensuing the Basin Plan is delivered in accordance with the legislation.”

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