



**The Hon. Tony Burke MP**

**T R A N S C R I P T**

**Interview with ABC Country Hour SA**

**5 November 2010**

Subjects: Murray Darling Basin plan – Minister’s visit to Renmark

E&OE only

REPORTER: Minister Burke joins us now. Tony Burke, good afternoon to you.

BURKE: G’day Annabel.

REPORTER: Now what is the update firstly, before we talk about what you’ve heard in the Riverland today. What is the update with the Government’s position on the Water Act? Are there plans so step in and change it at this time?

BURKE: We don’t believe that we need to. There are three things that I’ve been saying we want to be able to do - we want to have healthy rivers, strong communities and food production. Now when Malcolm Turnbull first introduced the legislation he said that the Act allowed us to optimise the environmental, the economic, and the social outcomes. Penny Wong said the same and I’ve said the same thing.

When the Guide came out a view went around that somehow the Water Act prevented us from optimising all three. So I asked for some legal advice be done by the Australian Government Solicitor and announced that whatever I received, I would be making it public. I actually released it on the same day that I received it. It affirmed the view that both sides of politics have held for many years and that is that the Water Act allows, and is intended to make sure, that we optimise the environmental, economic, and social outcomes.

REPORTER: Ok, so was that one of the key issues that was raised at the meeting that you had with community and business groups today?

BURKE: I think the community today was aware of that development and certainly from the moment I stood up, it wasn't a meeting where I spent most of the time talking. I spent most of the time sitting down listening and took half a dozen pages of notes as people were making their contributions.

But I did talk at the beginning and I made clear the three objectives that I have and everybody in the community, certainly who was here today, agrees with those three. They just want to make sure that a community like this is dealt with fairly.

There was one comment made during the meeting that was really interesting. In the Basin we often talk about catchments and people refer to everything catchment by catchment and that's what the Guide does as well. But the comment was made today that when you get down to this part of the river the entire Basin is the catchment and it needs to be seen that way, that people do have a lot less control of the water that comes to them in this part of the river. I just thought of the contribution it certainly crystallized the mood of the room.

REPORTER: Ok, let's nut down some of the issues that have been raised in the past following the release of the draft Murray Darling Basin Plan. One example that has been raised, to demonstrate the impact of the proposed sustainable diversion limits, that those sorts of water cuts are the equivalent to a number of towns shutting down in the Riverland. What's your reaction to that? And was that brought up in the meeting today?

BURKE: Not in those terms but I had raised the issue that even from the irrigators perspective that we only buy from somebody who has put their water on the market. There is no forced acquisition or anything like that. That's not necessarily providing a level of comfort for the community because a community member who works in the town is never a willing seller. But with the significant loss of productivity in the local area, it still hits them very hard.

So a lot of the discussion today was trying to work through ways, that while there is an acknowledgement that buybacks are one of the measures, to see how far we can go with the infrastructure issues. To see what can be done in terms of improving irrigation efficiency in any part of the Basin, whether its on farm or whether its centralised. But also a lot of discussion about the ways that we can manage our environmental assets more effectively so we can get the better environmental outcome without simply requiring volume as though that's the only answer that can matter. There are some environmental

assets in the Basin where volume is critical, the Lower Lakes and Coorong being classic examples. But for a lot of the environmental assets in the Basin there can be far more complex ways of using engineering solutions, pumps and things like that, so you can get the environmental outcome without requiring the same level of volume.

REPORTER: So just going back to the infrastructure side of things, South Australia has adhered to water caps for a number of years which means in that time South Australia's agricultural development may have lagged behind other states. Because of the responsible water use, the Chair of the MDBA, Mike Taylor, said that these would not be taken into account in the Plan. Can you give a commitment that SA's record of responsible water use will be considered when the Plan comes to you?

BURKE: When it comes to me, my commitment is that all the issues that are raised with me during consultation, they all affect the issues that I then have to deal with. I made a call early on that given that there is a piece of law saying that the Authority has to be independent, that I won't be shouting instructions at them from the sidelines. But at the end of all of this the buck does stop with me. They provide recommendations to me but I have an opportunity to intervene directly on the Plan and that's why the consultation is so important.

REPORTER: Have you learnt anything new today from this trip today, following your discussions, that you weren't aware of before?

BURKE: There were some specific issues about some of the challenges of water trading. There were some historic issues about over allocation and some issues raised with respect to New South Wales that I do want to follow up - going back to 1968, I think the year was, and some references as to individual state governments going well beyond what the person making the comments considered to be sustainable use.

Also a sense that people have in the community where they feel that they have been responsible, they feel that they have been early adopters of efficient technology and wanting to make sure that that gets taken into account. So that example was one that hadn't been put to me in any way before which I now want to go away and have a look at.

REPORTER: Minister Burke, I do appreciate your time on the Country Hour today. Thank you.

BURKE: Good to talk to you.

REPORTER: That's Water Minister Tony Burke talking to us from the Riverland.

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