

Plan for crucial Australian rivers draws anger

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This file photo shows a stretch of the Murray River, near Albury in New South Wales. Canberra wants water usage cuts of 2,750 gigalitres a year in the vast Murray-Darling Basin which produces more than one-third of the country's food supply and has been over exploited for years. But irrigators say the move to aid the ailing river system will ruin some communities.

Farmers Monday slammed the government's draft plan to rescue a crucial river system supplying Australia's food bowl, saying it will destroy communities and put pressure on food prices.

Canberra wants [water usage](#) cuts of 2,750 gigalitres a year in the vast Murray-Darling [Basin](#) in Australia's east which produces more than one-third of the country's [food supply](#) and has been over exploited for years.

But irrigators say the move to aid the ailing [river system](#), struggling to

recover after years of drought, will ruin some communities.

"If the draft Basin plan is adopted in its current form the Minister would be responsible for economically and socially destroying communities reliant on water for their survival," Stewart Ellis, of the National Irrigators' Council, said.

Murray-Darling Basin Authority chair Craig Knowles said there was no quick fix for the basin, which stretches thousands of kilometres (miles) from Queensland state to South Australia and crosses various climates.

"The old way of managing the basin has well and truly reached its use-by-date," Knowles told ABC Television.

"We've endeavoured to strike a balance."

But irrigators quickly criticised the draft, under which the cuts would be phased in over seven years, as did environmentalists.

"It gives primacy to the environment while people and communities have come a poor second," National Farmers' Federation chief executive Matt Linnegar told reporters.

The Australian Conservation Foundation described the draft plan as a failure for the basin which was seriously depleted after a long-running drought and suffering from increased salt concentrations due in part to low rainfall.

"It doesn't do enough to flush the salt out through the Murray mouth, revive dying wetlands and keep the country's lifeblood -- the Murray-Darling -- flowing," spokesman Paul Sinclair said.

The Murray-Darling, covering more than one million square kilometres,

passes through Queensland, [New South Wales](#), Victoria and South Australia, and is subject to the cycles of droughts and flooding for which the nation is known.

The release of an initial draft report into the basin last year provoked angry farmers to burn copies of the plan and national Environment Minister Tony Burke said the latest version would affect regional communities.

"You can't have reform without having that," Burke said.

But he added the draft was designed so the river system entered the next drought with a level of resilience to ensure no repeat of some of the "diabolical consequences" of the last drought.

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