

Scientists renew calls for inquiry into Murray-Darling Basin plan Experts warn we are wasting a huge amount of money with no guarantee more water is reaching the environment

Lisa Cox

Tue 9 Jul 2019 12.31 AEST Last modified on Tue 9 Jul 2019 13.10 AEST Shares 21 Scientists warn billions has been spent on the Murray-Darling Basin without any guarantee more water is actually reaching the environment Scientists warn billions has been spent on the Murray-Darling Basin without any guarantee more water is actually reaching the environment. Photograph: Mike Bowers/The Guardian There are renewed calls for an independent commission of inquiry into the management of water flows in the Murray-Darling Basin with scientists warning billions have been spent without any guarantee more water is reaching the environment.

Richard Beasley SC, who was the counsel assisting the South Australian Murray-Darling royal commission, says there needs to be a national commission of inquiry established with a remit to conduct a full independent audit of water-saving schemes.

On Monday, the ABC's Four Corners examined billions of dollars of taxpayer funds spent on a national water infrastructure scheme that is intended to recover water for the basin by giving farmers money to build more efficient water infrastructure.

Barnaby Joyce approved plan to chase 80m water buyback, documents show [Read more Guardian Australia](#) sale in 2017 by Eastern Australia Agriculture.

Farming and irrigation bodies, including the National Farmers Federation and Cotton Australia, have criticised Monday night's program, with the head of the NFF saying it misrepresented how the water trading system worked.

There are no new water entitlements. When new dams are built or new crops are planted, water must be purchased from the market in other words, from other farmers, Fiona Simson said.

But Beasley said there were serious questions about how taxpayer money was being spent on the water infrastructure program and problems, including the extent of the environmental benefit, had been highlighted by scientific experts throughout the South Australian royal commission.

I do listen to people who, in my judgment, have the expertise to tell us we are wasting a huge amount of money on this scheme, he said.

I think it is very important that there is a full, independent audit of everything that has gone on with this scheme so that the taxpayer knows a) who has received the money b) for what purpose and c) what is the science that establishes how much water the environment has actually obtained.

Some irrigators have been expanding their operations, while too little water is flowing downstream David Papps, former environmental water holder We hear that 700 gigalitres have been returned through these schemes, that is just an assertion.

He said an investigation should be structured as a national commission of inquiry, with powers to compel witnesses and documents, but led by a panel of independent scientific experts.

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There are plenty of other problems with the basin. This is just one of them, Beasley said.

The federal minister for water resources, David Littleproud, defended the water infrastructure scheme, saying water efficiency projects return water to the river system whilst protecting rural jobs and communities rather than decimating them as water buybacks do.

Tough nut to crack: the almond boom and its drain on the Murray-Darling Read more The Coalition uses water efficiency projects instead of water buybacks to recover water because water buybacks mean less farm production, less harvesting and packing jobs in small towns, and less money spent in the local pubs and restaurants, he said.

Recovering large parcels of water from a company through water efficiency projects instead of effectively closing dozens of family farms in a small community through water buybacks is unarguably much better for those communities and the real families who live in them.

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But the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, which includes former commonwealth environmental water holder, David Papps, said the processes behind the scheme were opaque and billions had been spent without any guarantee more water is actually reaching the environment.

The business cases for these water efficiency schemes are never made public so its impossible to determine their cost-effectiveness. What we do know is that some irrigators have been expanding their operations, while too little water is flowing downstream, the group said in a statement.

With around \$1.5bn in public funds still to be allocated for water efficiencies, the Department of Agriculture and MDBA must restore trust by being completely transparent about any further deals, and properly measure any outcomes.