



Media Release

10 January 2019

Fished killed by poor river management

The NSW and Federal governments must accept responsibility for their role in the catastrophic fish kills on the Darling River in western NSW this month.

“The extended drought has clearly been a factor in the environmental disaster that has unfolded over the past week in NSW’s largest inland river,” **Nature Conservation Council CEO Kate Smolski said.**

“However, the long dry spell is the catalyst, not the cause of this calamity.

“The drought has exposed the consequences of decades of mismanagement of our inland rivers and wetlands.

“This week’s unprecedented fish kill is the result of policies and actions taken by the NSW Government that favour water extraction, not river health.

“A key opportunity to improve the health of the Darling River system through the Basin Plan has been lost.

“The Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), federal and NSW governments have ignored the science, which clearly shows what is need to have healthy rivers with healthy fish populations.

“The government and the MDBA have for years favoured the interests of big irrigators over the health of the river, other primary producers and rural communities that depend on the river for their survival.”

Inland Rivers Network spokesperson Bev Smiles said: “The NSW Government is responsible for long-term mismanagement and over-extraction of our inland rivers. Irrigators have access to publicly-owned water that taxpayers bought to improve the health of our rivers.

“Irrigators also have access to natural inflows from tributaries below main dams and continue to harvest small and medium overland flood flows with no regulation.

“Loss of natural flows and no protection for publicly owned environmental water has affected the Darling River's ability to withstand severe drought.”

The Nature Conservation Council and Inland Rivers Network are calling on the NSW Government to:

- **Mandate environmental flows.** Water management regimes must mandate flows sufficient to maintain healthy, functioning river systems and wetlands. Water-sharing plans must include enforceable rules and allocations of environmental water.
- **Tighten the water-use monitoring regime.** The government must implement the ‘no meter, no pump’ objective universally. Systemic failures have led to poor monitoring and enforcement of water

laws, including alleged corruption and criminal activity in relation to improper use and over-extraction of water.

- **Control floodplain harvesting.** The government must require cumulative environmental assessment prior to issuing floodplain harvesting licences, and place limits on extraction. Irrigators in Northern Basin catchments have built levees and dams to capture and store floodwaters which have stopped water flowing downstream to recharge groundwater and fill billabongs, lagoons and wetlands.
- **Rule out new dams.** Promote more efficient water usage and do not build new dams. Large dams and weirs alter natural water flows, significantly degrading the health of rivers. New dams do not create more water, they redistribute water, withholding it from downstream users and the environment.

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