



Media Release

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Federal Government urged 'not to forget people' in Basin Plan

The national organisation representing Australia's winegrape growers is urging the Federal Government to "pay close attention" to the needs of people when assessing proposed water cutbacks outlined in the recently-released Guide to the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

Executive director of Wine Grape Growers Australia, Mr Lawrie Stanford, said the nation's grape growers were deeply concerned about the proposal to cut water diversions by between 22% and 29% a year across the Murray Darling Basin.

"While WGGA recognises the importance of restoring water flows to the environment in the Basin, we are keen to see that people in the Basin irrigation communities are treated with the same amount of respect and dignity," Mr Stanford said.

"Reducing the water available by between 3,000 and 4,000 gigalitres a year would have a potentially devastating effect on hundreds of small and independent winegrape growers in the Riverland, Murray Darling-Swan Hill and Riverina along with the businesses and communities that they currently support," Mr Stanford said.

"WGGA - on behalf of a critical agricultural sector that generates significant export revenue for the nation - is urging the Federal Government and the Murray Darling Basin Authority to pay close attention to the balance between the needs of people and the needs of the environment.

"While we all recognise the importance of the environment, we want the Federal Government not to forget about people either."

Mr Stanford said in presenting a strong case to the Federal Government, the WGGA will be supporting regional grower associations that are working closely with affected regional communities.

"While it's too early yet to determine the precise impacts of such savage cuts to water available for irrigation - as growers have plantings of differing sizes under varying irrigation regimes in different locations - there is no question that cuts of the magnitude of 22% to 29% would cause widespread business failure and severe social disruption," he said.

"The Murray Darling Basin Authority acknowledges the socio-economic dislocation that would be caused if the cutbacks go ahead."

Mr Stanford said, however, he welcomed an assurance by the Authority that its *Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan* was not a "done deal".

"It is a positive that the Authority has embarked on an extensive two-month consultation period among affected communities in the Murray Darling Basin," Mr Stanford said.

He said WGGA also welcomes the Government's assurance that water buyback will only occur from willing sellers.

"The buyback will enable some financially-distressed growers to exit the industry with some dignity as the Australian wine sector is still suffering the effects of a global winegrape oversupply, punishingly high exchange rates and a highly competitive and crowded world wine market."

Mr Stanford said the immense changes proposed in the Basin Plan come at a bad time for the winegrape growing sector, in particular, as it jeopardises the future of otherwise long term viable businesses that are currently stressed in a difficult operating environment.

"Our message to the government is very simple: please consider the livelihoods of winegrape growers and the impact on community life when making any future decisions on water cutbacks in the Murray Darling Basin," he said.

"Through the Federal Government's discretionary powers to adopt or modify the Basin Plan, WGGA appeals to it to exercise these powers with great care and to ensure that just and fair transition arrangements, including financial assistance beyond the water buyback, are put in place to address severe social disruption.

"And, finally, it's important to remember that vibrant and prosperous regional communities are a critical factor in protecting the environment," Mr Stanford said, "just as a sustainable environment is required to support prosperous regional communities."

For further information and media interviews, please contact WGGA Executive Director Lawrie Stanford on 0417 859 282 or Chair Vic Patrick on 0408 849 533.