

Media Release

Date: Thursday 28 May 2009

Testing irrigation's future in northern Victoria

A pilot study has commenced which will investigate the future strategic withdrawal of irrigation to a channel system north-west of Kerang.

The study will be undertaken by the Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project (NVIRP) and will involve an extensive farm irrigation assessment process. The objective of the study will be to develop an integrated support package to assist with the decommissioning of the public irrigation channel currently servicing eighteen landholdings.

"The irrigation infrastructure across the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District has served the community well. It has supported a viable agricultural industry, but the freeing up of the water market on top of commodity price fluctuations, continued drought, and increased environmental needs have also taken their toll on this region," NVIRP CEO Murray Smith said.

"This pilot study and interview process will canvass the views of these landowners to assess their future requirements. The community needs to carefully consider the way the irrigation system is to remain affordable and support profitable irrigation entities well into the future, or if the footprint of the irrigation system can be reduced to meet these objectives. It may be that some areas are no longer sustainable for irrigation as we know it," Mr Smith said.

The channel system chosen for this pilot study has already seen 80 per cent of its water share sold permanently out of the area. Water distribution efficiency levels are now at around 50 per cent whilst the target for efficiency is expected to be up to 85 per cent. These properties annual usage has decreased to around 15 per cent of previous levels.

This channel system was selected by NVIRP in consultation with Goulburn-Murray Water, TRAMS and other agencies. The channel currently supplies eighteen separate properties ranging in size from 1 to 500 hectares. The immediate objective is to ensure that these landowners are closely involved in any transition discussions. There are a number of options for landowners to consider as well as an integrated support package.

"We have funds to spend on upgrading the irrigation infrastructure but we need to ensure that these funds are spent where irrigation has a secure future. That is why we will be working very closely with this community to determine their future needs and provide more certainty for their future farming operations," Mr Smith said.

The pilot study commenced with a landholder survey and will be followed by landholder meetings. There will also be opportunities to include written submissions throughout the study.

"I know some sections of the irrigation industry will see this project as picking winners and losers," Mr Smith said, "however I see it differently. These landowners have been under severe stress for some years and facing an uncertain future.

“This is an opportunity for each landowner to determine their own destiny – whether this means leaving the irrigation industry with dignity or remaining as an irrigator maybe in another location or with an alternative irrigation supply. Throughout this pilot study I expect a wide range of options to be developed and considered,” Mr Smith said.

-end-

Media Contact:

Merrill Boyd
Executive Manager Communications
Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project
T: 0438 678 323
E: merrill.boyd@nvirp.com.au