

## IRRIGATION ALLOCATIONS

24 October 2007

**The Hon. A.L. EVANS:** I rise to speak on the plight of our irrigators in the face of the current crippling drought. Prices for purchasing water from the Murray-Darling Basin for irrigation use have risen from the usual level of about \$250 per megalitre to as much as \$1,500 per megalitre—a sixfold increase. The information I am hearing from our constituents in irrigation areas is that they are being driven to the wall by the drought. The wealthier irrigators, who can afford the quadruple water prices, can pay to keep their crops alive. As an aside, I have heard that dairies in the eastern states are profiting from selling their water to South Australians and using their huge profits to buy hay instead of watering their pastures.

Presently, the state government is allowing irrigators 16 per cent of their usual water allocation which, for some, means that they will not be able to keep their crops alive. The devastating impact of this cannot be understood fully unless we appreciate the time it takes for new plantings to move to full production. If the trees, vines and other plants die, the irrigator faces a number of years before any crop is yielded, and even then it is a few years after that before the crop comes into full production—years of delay that many of them simply cannot afford.

On the subject of the present 16 per cent water allocation for Murray irrigators, I note that the Minister for Water Security's counterpart in New South Wales recently increased allocations from the Murrumbidgee River from 60 to 75 per cent. The Murrumbidgee is a major upstream tributary of the River Murray which, on last reports, saw 150 megalitres flowing past Balranald, which is one-tenth of what flowed past Blanchetown in the same period.

So, the Murrumbidgee is a significant tributary to the Murray system. Not surprisingly, the minister's news that the allocation was to be increased was received with jubilation by the local media, with one local irrigator representative saying this 'could see virtually all high security farmers at full

production'. The picture for South Australian irrigators is starkly different. In the Goulburn River system, another more significant tributary, allocations were raised at the start of this month to 23 per cent. I have not found out how much of an allocation Queensland's cotton and rice growers have received, and I hope for our sake that they are not in a similar boat to those on the Murrumbidgee.

*The Age* newspaper reported last month that federal agriculture minister Peter McGauran, when he was speculating about who may need to take up the federal government offer for money to walk off the land, mentioned South Australian irrigators. He said:

...uneconomical blocks in the Sunraysia grape and citrus area in north-west Victoria and south-western New South Wales, and in the Riverland regions along the Murray River in South Australia.

He also said:

These were a 'legacy of history', with many established for the resettlement of soldiers after their return from World War I or World War II.

In conclusion, it is clear that a lot of South Australian irrigators are facing financial ruin. Family First wonders whether the government has put together projections of the number or percentage of irrigators who will lose their crops this year due to drought and insufficient water allocations. Does the government know how many will go bankrupt and, in any event, how hard that will hit irrigators, their families and communities? We suggest that this summer will be absolutely devastating for these irrigators, their families and for the communities, and we call on the Minister for Water Security to do everything she can for them, especially given so many of them are her own constituents.