

**NATIONAL MEDIA BRIEFING - 6 September 2007 in Melbourne**

**Is Australia still in drought? – Post winter update**

**TRANSCRIPT**

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What I want to start doing today is explain to you that the Commission looks after the southern half of the Murray Darling Basin, basically the Murray and the lower Darling so what I'm talking about today really is that southern part of the basin and not really referring to the northern part of the basin.

This first slide I want to show you really illustrates the average, sorry, the daily inflow that we've had since the 1st of March and that's the red line that runs along the bottom there and the blue line, the dotted line that is above that is the average daily inflows in the long term average sense so the point of this slide is to show you that the inflows, the daily inflows that we've had since the 1st of March, on no single day have exceeded the average daily inflows that we have out of our 116 years of records.

If you translate that into how does that look in terms of inflows into our storages, this shows you over a 12 month period, the blue line shows you averaging flows into these storages, or into the Murray sorry, Murray system and you can see that the peak of the inflow period is between July and October as Mike said, late winter and early spring. The black line shows you inflows for last year, that was a record low inflow. It was less than 60% of the previous minimum inflows that we had in 116 years of record and the red line shows you the inflows that we've had this year so the good thing about the inflows that we've had this year is that in June, July and August, we exceeded what we had last year but we are still a long way below our long term average and I guess that's the point that we want to make that even though it's slightly better, we've had a couple of months where it's slightly better it's way below long term average inflows.

Looking at storages, because water availability depends on inflows and on storages and the blue line again shows you the long term average storage that we have at various times of year. The black line shows you the storage through the year last year and the red line shows you the storage that we have at the moment and how it's increased this year. Again you can see from this graph that we're a long way below, even where we were last year. Last year was a bad year but we're 1700 gegalitres in storage now below where we were at this time last year so not only do we have low inflows but we have incredibly low storage as well. If you look at initial storage for the year plus inflows this brings the 2 issues together, storage and inflows. The starting point shows you the storage that we started off with at the beginning of the year and how the inflows change that story through the year. Now the top line there shows you the blue one up the top, shows you 2002, 2003 which happen to be of course another one of our driest years you know, amongst our 10 driest years, that was another drought year that you may all recall and we started off with you know just below 4000 gegalitres in inflow and ended up with round about 6000. Now I should point out of course that what we end up with is after you've actually taken out you know, diversions, that irrigators have taken out and that would have happened in 2002-3. If you look at 2006-7, which is the dark blue line, you can see where we started off in terms of storage and you can see where we ended up at the end of the year with storage plus inflows and I think you can see too what's happening this year. Again you can see where we started off, at the beginning of the year around about 900 gegalitres in storage, at the beginning of this irrigation year, and those dotted lines towards the end there are our best estimate, based on looking at information for the 20 driest years in our record, that's our best estimate of where we're going to end up for the year and so that's a range of where we estimate we might end up through the year based on history of our 20 driest years.

I guess the point is that the situation is deteriorating. As I mentioned 65% of our inflows occur between July and October and the probability of receiving average inflows for the rest of the year is actually very small. It's important to point out too that catchments have got very dry. Since we had you know, good rainfall in May and June and in the first week of July, since then the catchments have started to dry out.

The current estimate of Murray system inflows for the balance of year is between about 750 gegalitres and about 2750 gegalitres and as I mentioned that's based on looking at our 20 driest winters and what happens after that, and again I'd say it's an estimate but it's important I think to point out that the impacts on irrigators of this will be significant. And already you're starting to see impacts on irrigators.

This table shows you irrigation allocations for 06/07 at this time in 06/07 and irrigation allocations as they are today. So you can see that New South Wales high security this time last year was round about 97%. Now certainly throughout the year there was a reduction. There were 2 reductions in their allocations but they were a lot higher, they ended up a lot higher than zero. New South Wales general security is about the same this year as last year although this year they do have some access to water that was suspended last year. Victorian water right is about 85% last year and right now it's 5% with access to carry over and South Australia last year 80%, it did go down to 60% throughout the year but compared with right now it's 13% in South Australia plus access to carry over.

So compared with last year which again was generally lower than any previous year, allocations are very low, and because of all this our current operations, how we run the river, is very different from any other year in recent memory. Hume Dam we're releasing bare minimum inflows whereas we would normally be releasing quite a bit more. The flood of South Australia is about a quarter of what we would normally have at this time of year. The lower lakes, we anticipate if these conditions continue that they will fall to record low levels and that we will see higher salinity, very high salinity in those lower lakes and right now salinity in South Australia is starting to rise. At Morgan last week it was 700 Ecs.

With low amounts of water availability and low flows and relatively high temperatures, I mean it was 29 in Mildura last week, the risk of algal blooms is high. I should point out that at the moment we already have contingency measures in place. We're doing a number of things, like we're running the river slower and lower than we normally would at this time of year and we have been for a couple of months. We're trying to store as much water as we can in Hume and Dartmouth where it's deeper and cooler. We're trying to disconnect wetlands to save evaporation.

Basically we're trying to minimise losses and minimise evaporation through the system. We also have special water sharing arrangements in place which we've negotiated because the Murray Darling Basic Agreement when it was put together did not contemplate the low levels of water availability that we do have.

So how would you summarise the situation? Well I think the summary is that storages are very low, that inflows are very low, that we're about half way through the period where we get our greatest inflows for the year. There's a very small chance of average inflows for the rest of the year. It's going to take multiple years for our storages to recover and the outlook is very grim. Thank you.

(E&OE)

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