



press clip

Water offsets probe

By Christopher Testa

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VICTORIA and NSW have joined forces to launch a review into one of the least understood aspects of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Victorian Water Minister Lisa Neville and her NSW counterpart Niall Blair yesterday announced an expert panel would provide advice on technical aspects of the sustainable diversion limit (SDL) adjustment mechanism.

SDL offsets are a mechanism of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan that allow 650 gegalitres of the 2750GL water recovery target to be achieved through projects that deliver environmental outcomes with less water.

One example is the Sunraysia Modernisation Project, which led to a reduction in water losses by installing pipes where century-old channels once ran through Mildura's irrigation districts.

Another SDL offset could include modifications to the Menindee Lakes, or changes in its operating rules, that reduce water losses through evaporation.

Lower Darling horticulturist Alan Whyte, who grows citrus on his Jamesville property, said the review would be progress if it cleared up uncertainty about exactly how SDL offsets were measured.

"If push comes to shove, no one really knows what they are," he said. "The states signed up to come up with SDL offsets and the definition of what they are is not good."

Water users along the lower

Darling have concerns about what implications SDL offsets at the Menindee Lakes could have on long-term water security.

Mr Whyte said NSW could

look to secure as many as two-thirds of its SDL offset obligations by storing less water at Menindee and using it more often, because it was politically easier than generating water savings in the Riverina.

He said generating water savings at Menindee would require NSW to consider ways of preserving a reliable supply for the farming families reliant on water from the lower Darling River.

The expert panel will report to the ministers in mid-March and its members include former Murray-Darling Basin Commission chief executive Dr Don Blackmore, water resource consultant Brett Tucker, co-founder of consulting company Aither Chris Arnott and environmental scientist Professor Peter Davies.

Mr Blair said the issue was "above politics" and communities on both sides of the Murray were facing the same challenges.

"I have been very clear that the

basin plan can be implemented, but not at all costs," he said.

Ms Neville said she supported the recovery of water through infrastructure investments to reduce leakage and evaporation in irrigation systems but not through further buybacks.



Lisa Neville