

Wednesday, 8 November 2006

PLANNING FOR DROUGHT IS ESSENTIAL

Premier Mike Rann says the SA Government will begin planning for a temporary weir at Wellington from today – in the hope that it will never be used.

“We have to make short-term contingency plans for it. Any Government that did not would be grossly irresponsible.

“By the same token, I hope we never have to use it. The only situation under which we would ever completely block off the flow of the River Murray at Wellington is if Adelaide was in danger of running out of drinking water.

“Clearly we don’t want that to ever occur, and yesterday in Canberra it was agreed by the Murray Darling system States that we need to plan a national approach for a better solution.

“A group of experts with representatives from each State will be reporting back to the Premiers and Prime Minister by December 15 this year with the best options for the future use of water in the system.

“But if in the event this drought - which the expert are now telling us is a once in 1000 year event – is followed by a second drought next season, we will have no choice but to build the weir.

“Planning for the weir includes, for example, approval processes, design and construction preparation, consultation with down-stream communities and assessing and mitigating environmental impacts.

“It would help reduce massive loss of water through evaporation and avoid Adelaide running low of fresh water.

“This morning I met with all heads of Government departments to ensure they are aware of the seriousness of the situation and that they respond quickly and effectively to contingency plans – especially those that will be brought forward by our newly-formed Water Security Advisory Group.

“I was very pleased yesterday with the favourable response from the Commonwealth about an environmental proposal to build two large channels to feed fresh water from the south-east drainage system into the southern end of the Coorong.

“This proposed \$14 million project that the Government believes should be funded under the Federal National Water Initiative, is aimed at saving the internationally-important Coorong and its wildlife in the event of the River Murray running dry – with or without the weir.

“Yesterday in Canberra, I made a special plea to all of the Murray Darling Basin States and the Prime Minister that they understand that South Australia has the most to lose from this drought.

“Unlike the other States, 95 per cent of all South Australians rely on the River Murray for water – domestic, industrial, commercial and agricultural. This includes 26 towns in the Riverland area where alternative sources of water would be very hard to find,” Mr Rann said.