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 **MEDIA RELEASE**

**Thursday 11 November 2021**

**TRADITIONAL OWNERS WANT A SAY IN MURRAY-DARLING WATER REFORM**

Traditional Owners voices about water reform in the Murray-Darling Basin have again been ignored by the Federal Government.

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations calls on Minister for Resources and Water Keith Pitt to recognise that Traditional Owners of Northern Victoria have never ceded their sovereignty or given consent for anyone else to manage or make decisions about their waterways.

The Federation also asserts that the advisory group on water market reform, as announced today by Minister Pitt, denied Traditional Owners the right to self-determination because they did not have a seat at the decision-making table.

The glaring oversight is at complete odds with the principles of self-determination as set out in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People and ignores the February 2021 Murray-Darling Basin water markets inquiry report which highlighted First Nations and Traditional Owner as key players in the water market, alongside investors, irrigators, urban water authorities, environmental water holders and water brokers.

The same report also identified that Traditional Owners needed to give their voice to the development of water market data standards to ensure equitable rights to water.

First Nations groups have been disposed of their rights since colonisation and the creation of markets that allocate access to shares in water resources.

Across the Murray-Darling Basin, 44 First Nations groups share just 0.12 per cent of the water market, with their 64 entitlements equalling an annual cumulative water take of 13 gigalitres. That water allocation is worth less than 1 per cent ($15 million) of the total market value of $16 billion.

In Northern Victoria Traditional Owners have been working to re-establish cultural water flows to protect and heal Country and strengthen cultural participation.

This latest snub follows revelations in October that a plan to return $40 million in water entitlements to First Nations people had been removed from Minister Pitt’s portfolio and has instead handed over to Indigenous Australians Minister Ken Wyatt without consultation with Traditional Owners.

In 2018 the Federal Government promised to return the water rights but Traditional Owners fear the handballing of the water returns to the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) would see that program drowned in red tape and bureaucracy.

**ENDS**

**QUOTES ATTRIBUTABLE TO**

**Paul Paton, CEO, Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations:**

“Traditional Owners have an enduring connection to Country and water.”

“We have cultural responsibilities to protect and heal Country and that requires water to ensure the survival of plants and animals across the Murray-Darling Basin.”

**Rodney Carter, Chairman, Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations and CEO Djaara:**

“Traditional Owners and First Nations people must have a voice in any decisions that affect them, including reforms to water across the Murray-Darling Basin.”

“It’s just not good enough that a government report identifies this on one hand and then we are again dispossessed of a voice when the time comes to make decisions about how water is allocated.

“As members of the oldest living culture in the world, Traditional Owners have managed water for thousands of years and it’s time for our expertise to be taken seriously by all governments.”

For more information about this Media Release: Madison West 0433 583 011 or email mwest@porternovelli.com.au