

Media Statement

20 May 2024

Stolen water wealth must be returned to Traditional Owners through Murray-Darling Basin buybacks

The Victorian Government is on notice to allow the buying back – and immediate handing over to Traditional Owners – of water entitlements in the Murray-Darling Basin, says the state-wide body that advocates for the rights and interests of Victorian Traditional Owner groups.

Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations CEO Paul Paton says the Government's recently released *Planning our Basin future together* prospectus fails to understand the true meaning of self-determination and is inconsistent with Minister for Water Harriet Shing's acknowledgement at Yoorrook Justice Commission of Traditional Owners' rights to make decisions about water.

"Minister Shing acknowledged that Traditional Owners have been systemically excluded from water decision-making and agreed that our stolen water should be returned to us," says Mr Paton.

"The Victorian part of the Murray-Darling Basin flows with more than \$10 billion in water that has been managed for millennia by Traditional Owners – who today own virtually no water entitlements, and who the Government will continue to lock out of decision-making if it persists in opposing a water license buy-back plan."

The Federation's 2022 [submission](#) to the Victorian Government's *Water is Life* strategy objected to opposing buybacks, due to both the Government's obligation to address the legacy of dispossessing Traditional Owners of their rights to water, and the wellbeing of people and Country water wealth could promote.

Last month five Victorian Government ministers told the Yoorrook Justice Commission of the Government's commitment to Aboriginal self-determination – but the Federation told the same Commission that the Government doesn't fully understand what self-determination means, and Victoria's policies currently fail to meet the minimum standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

"A Victorian Government that understands self-determination will restore our authority as rights-holders to water and not stand in the way of Traditional Owners having proprietary rights in water," Mr Paton says.

"*Planning our Basin future together* recognises that Traditional Owners have been shut out of decision-making, then promptly continues to hold the door closed. We don't just want 'involvement' in the Government's plans about water – we want recognition as rights-holders to Country, and formal partnerships that transition water ownership and management back with Traditional Owners. Rather than simply opposing the Federal Government's plans, Victoria must talk with Traditional Owners about alternatives. Our solution provides a way to keep water in the consumptive pool, while strengthening environmental outcomes, and giving effect to the objectives and principles of *Water is Life*."

– ENDS –

About the Federation

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations is the Victorian state-wide body that convenes and advocates for the rights of Traditional Owners while progressing wider social, economic, environmental and cultural objectives. It was established in 2013 by Traditional Owner Corporations who recognised they could be stronger together and advance their shared interests in policy engagement, economic opportunity and caring for Country.

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