

# REVIEW OF IRRIGATION SALINITY MANAGEMENT POLICY

The availability of low salinity water from the River Murray underpins the health of the environment, productivity of the \$2.2 billion Murraylands and Riverland food and wine industry and is critical to providing good quality drinking water to up to 90% of the State's population.

South Australia has an obligation to manage its salinity impacts under the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement and ongoing effort is needed even with the implementation of the Basin Plan and significant improvements to irrigation efficiency.

The River Murray Salinity Zoning Policy is a key element of South Australia's salinity management program as it minimises salinity impacts from new irrigation development. The salinity zoning policy is implemented through site use approvals that specify the maximum volume of water that can be applied for irrigation on defined land parcels.

Stakeholders have raised concerns that the current policy may be unnecessarily restricting new development in high salinity impact zones and that it provides limited flexibility for irrigators to respond to changing market conditions (e.g. changing to a crop type with higher water requirements).

As a result of stakeholder feedback, changes have been explored to better support new irrigation development within South Australia's existing available capacity on the Basin Salinity

Register and to make it easier for irrigators to change to higher water use crops.

After considering a range of possible approaches along with advice from stakeholders and an expert review panel, two options for change have been identified.

## *Option 1 – Create new 30 year fixed term site use approvals*

This option proposes to create new 30 year fixed term site use approvals for new irrigation development, and allow increases to the volumes on existing site use approvals to enable conversion to higher water use crops within a specified, irrigated area. Key features include:

- No change to existing site use approvals that specify a maximum volume that can be applied to a defined land parcel.
- Creation of new 30 year fixed term site use approvals for irrigators who apply for approval for new or increased water use.
- Crop type change can occur through application to increase a site use approval volume within a specified maximum area.
- The 30 year fixed term site use approvals can be retired as they expire if necessary to meet the State's Basin compliance obligations.



### *Option 2 - Replace volumetric limits on site use approvals with a maximum irrigated area*

This option proposes to free up currently un-used site use approval volumes for new irrigation by converting actively utilised site use approval volumes to an approved irrigated area. The area would be based on the maximum annual irrigated footprint over the last six years. Key features include:

- Existing site use approvals are converted to a maximum area that can be irrigated rather than a maximum volume that can be used.
- New site use approvals can be issued for new or increased water use without fixed term conditions.
- Crop type change can occur without the need to apply to change a site use approval (as long as the maximum irrigated area does not increase).
- The allocation of new site use approvals can be restricted if necessary to meet the State's Basin compliance obligations.

### *Proposal to amend the River Murray Salinity Zoning Policy*

Option 1 can be implemented relatively quickly should it be supported. Option 2 provides a simpler arrangement but is a more substantial change and would require amendment of the Water Allocation Plan for the River Murray Prescribed Watercourse (River Murray WAP) as well as time to re-issue site use approvals. This could take more than 12 months.

Option 1 is seen as the preferred policy option as it can be implemented immediately but stakeholder feedback is also sought on whether to investigate and consult on more substantial reform under Option 2 as part of the development of the next River Murray WAP.

Other stakeholder issues such as improving communication and transfers of site use approval volume will be considered as part of implementing any amended policy.

A series of questions have been provided below to guide feedback on the amendment of the salinity zoning policy. Further information about the review is available at [www.yoursay.gov.au](http://www.yoursay.gov.au).

#### **Key questions for feedback**

- **Do you support the proposal to proceed with option 1 as the preferred option for implementation?**
- **Do you see any issues with implementing or administering option 1?**
- **Do you believe there is merit in further considering and consulting on the conversion of site use approval volumes to a maximum irrigated area under option 2 in the future?**
- **Do you have any suggestions as to how either option could be improved?**

