

Gillard budgets for Murray-Darling water buy-backs

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard says she will sign up to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's water plan if the Government is re-elected. (ABC TV)

Prime Minister Julia Gillard says she will sign up to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's water plan, despite not having seen it, if the Government is re-elected.



The Authority's report about the Murray-Darling's future has been delayed until after the election.

Speaking on commercial radio in Adelaide, Ms Gillard says she will find the money for water buy-backs no matter what it costs.

She says money for the buy-backs has already been budgeted for the next four years.

"We put in that budget period \$3.1 billion to buy water. We have currently used \$1.4 billion of that, so there's more money available to engage in implementing the plan, and then beyond the current budget period we will allocate money as necessary to implement the plan," she said.

"Budgets are about choices and I am saying we will make this choice and we do have money available in the Government's budget period.

"We put it aside, it's there, consistent without commitment to bring the budget back to surplus in 2013 and to not add a cent to the budget bottom line in this campaign."

But the Federal Liberal member for Mayo, Jamie Briggs, whose electorate includes the Lower Murray Lakes, says the Coalition will not sign up to a plan that it has not seen.

"We don't know whether it will be actually good for the system, we don't know how much it will cost, we don't know what the time frames are and she claims that she's signing up to it," he said.

"It is a complete farce.

"It is playing with South Australia's fears to get a political headline 10 days before an election."

Water Security Minister Penny Wong says the Government has already returned 900 gigalitres of water to the Murray-Darling system.

"If re-elected we will bridge any remaining gap between what is being returned and what is required to be returned by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority," she said.

"What this means is that we are determined to provide the rivers with the water they need and to provide certainty for farmers using water from the rivers.

"We will buy back the water our rivers need."

Ms Wong will not say how much it will cost to buy back the water, and the exact amount of water required will not be revealed until after the election.

"How much water is required will ultimately be a matter for the Authority," she said.

"We're also showing our determination to provide certainty for farmers that they will be able to have the opportunity to sell to the Government at a reasonable price as part of this adjustment process.

"Irrigators will need to take less out of the river, we have been up front in saying that."

The Federal Government has also announced that it has struck a deal with New South Wales for all the water saved by efficiency projects at Menindee Lakes to go into the Murray-Darling river system.

In return, Broken Hill will be drought proofed using ground water and \$300 million will be spent to secure urban water supplies in NSW's regional areas.

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