

# Media reporting on water issues needs to improve

■ By Adam Kay – CEO, Cotton Australia

**T**HE time has come for accurate and balanced media reporting on water issues and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

For many cotton growers and irrigators, they continue to navigate significant challenges. Not only are they dealing with the realities of drought and having to make tough decisions on-farm, they are also enduring the continued assaults on irrigated agriculture from sections of the media.



Adam Kay.

The realities of the situation are as follows.

These media assaults, mainly focused around water management, are not just short-term hits of frustration; their effects linger and add to the distrust and uncertainty swirling in the community. When this happens, the truth can be difficult for the public to see.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that prominent anti-irrigation proponents are on a campaign to undermine irrigators and water regulation in Australia, and they appear willing to stop at nothing to de-rail the hard work that has been done on the plan to date. What is even more disappointing is they are being helped by complicit sections of the media who either do not challenge their rhetoric, or do not challenge them strongly enough to bring balance to the conversation.

The recent report by the ABC's Four Corners program on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan's water efficiency projects is just one example of inaccurate and unbalanced reporting on water regulation.

The episode investigated whether taxpayers' money was being spent effectively through the efficiency projects, and then provided the audience with the impression that the federal government was giving large amounts of money to irrigators and allowing them to expand their water take – which is incorrect.

What Four Corners failed to adequately explain was that to receive the government's money for water efficiency projects, irrigators must surrender part of their water entitlement to the Commonwealth for environmental use. That water can never again be used by farmers, as it is now the environment's water. The only way a farmer can access more water is if they buy it from the reduced pool of water available for agriculture.

Four Corners also failed to include in the story the key fact that 700 billion litres of water has been recovered for the environment to date from the efficiency programs, an indication of how the projects are delivering results. Overall, the Basin Plan has so far delivered 2100 billion litres of water.

When we consider if the story was balanced, the episode featured 14 people opposed to water efficiency projects, one person with a neutral perspective and two people supporting

water efficiency projects. This does not constitute a balanced piece of journalism.

The insinuations and the omission of key facts by such an influential news program are unhelpful in achieving a balanced, fact-based public debate on such an important issue.

In a balanced response to the Four Corners episode, the ABC's own Media Watch presenter Paul Barry said, "Four Corners is absolutely right to question whether the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is working and taxpayers' money is being well spent; but, it should not ignore inconvenient evidence or fail to present one side of the argument, and we reckon it did."

The lack of factual debate on water issues particularly festers on social media. It is as if a line has been drawn, with anti-irrigation proponents on one side selectively peddling the facts that suit their argument, and irrigators on the other side trying valiantly to provide the full picture and add the missing facts to the conversation. This situation is not helped when sections of the media add fuel to the fire of misunderstanding through their inaccurate and unbalanced reporting.

On other occasions, bizarre claims are being made by some in order to fuel the emotional elements of the debate. For example, one critic recently proclaimed on social media, 'they call it a drought; this is not a drought, this is a man-made disaster', despite the fact that 97 per cent of New South Wales was either in drought or drought-affected at the time. This is the type of rhetoric and inaccuracies that are fueling this conversation and need to be called-out. Not only are proponents presenting opinion as fact, what they are presenting is demonstrably wrong.

## Now, to the good news

I have been incredibly proud of those in our industry that have stood up to defend cotton and irrigation and add facts and balance to the conversation. It is not an easy thing to do, particularly when those opposed to irrigation have loud megaphones to air their views with. I thank those growers and encourage them and others to continue putting the facts and our industry's views forward.

We call on media organisations, including the ABC, to reflect on their coverage of water issues to date and assess how they will better cover the topic into the future to ensure balance and accuracy.

As a society, we do not need to live in a fact-less vacuum if we do not want to.

As a society and an industry, we can continue to hold journalists and loud social media voices to account for the things they say and report. We can demand better and we can insist that journalists do their job properly. We are not calling for one-sided coverage that favours cotton and irrigation; but we are calling for fair, balanced and accurate coverage that enables people to form their own views on water issues based on the facts of the situation.

Together, our industry can correct the facts. Together, we can share our story. Together, we can ensure Australian cotton gets a fair go in the media. 