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## Transparency critical to faith in NRM system

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**Committee**



The South Australian Government announced last year that regional NRM levies are to be used to recover costs for water planning and management (WPM) activities undertaken by the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources.

Significant levy increases are being proposed in several NRM regions to fund the WPM costs which amount statewide to \$3.5 million for 2015-16, and \$6.7 million per year from 2016-17 onwards, indexed annually.

Primary Producers SA and its associated commodity groups have raised concerns regarding the lack of transparency surrounding the calculation of costs of WPM activities undertaken by DEWNR and the associated contribution of levy payers. This transparency is critical to ensure that levy payers have faith in the NRM system that they are funding.

PPSA has been calling on the State Government to undertake an independent review of WPM costs with the results to be made public. At a meeting last week Minister for Water Ian Hunter clearly stated to PPSA that he will not commit to the public independent review that has been requested. However he did commit to opening up the books of DEWNR to PPSA and PPSA's nominees to investigate how the WPM costs have been calculated. PPSA is hopeful that this opportunity will enhance transparency and allow greater scrutiny of this expenditure.

NRM Boards recently undertook consultation on their draft business plans which included the increased NRM land and water levies to account for the WPM cost-recovery. This consultation should have been the opportunity for levy payers to provide feedback to NRM Boards and Minister Hunter on the levies, how they are calculated and what they are spent on. However, in respect to WPM costs, there was no additional detail beyond multi-million dollar figures. A commitment has now been made by DEWNR to provide PPSA with a breakdown of WPM spending on a regional level. This information is welcomed but in the future it must be provided prior to public consultations to enable meaningful feedback to be given by levy payers regarding levy expenditure.

The NWI Pricing Principles to which Minister Hunter has linked the cost-recovery measures also support the need for transparency. They state that when WPM costs "are to be recovered from water users in whole or in part, activities should be 'tested' for cost-effectiveness by an independent

party and the findings of the cost-effectiveness review are to be made public". Minister Hunter has committed to providing information to PPSA to show how the SA Government is meeting its obligations under the NWI.

Sustainable management of water resources is in the interests of all primary producers as the daily operation of our businesses is dependent on the reliable supply of water. The broader community also impacts on water resources through business operations, domestic use and recreation.

Therefore, all South Australians have an interest in ensuring that our water resources are managed sustainably into the future. We need to be able to support the NRM system that performs this role and in order to provide this support we need levy expenditure that is transparent, accountable and justified.

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