



Vandals strike Hattah pumps are sabotaged

By CHRIS McLENNAN

THE Hattah Lakes pumps were vandalised just hours after the State Government ordered them re-started on Wednesday night.

Despite the warnings of local community leaders, police are now investigating an attempt to sabotage the resumption of environmental flows into the lakes.

‘... any criminal activity just brings discredit to the entire region.’

– Member for Mildura
Russell Savage

Although minor damage has only delayed the resumption by about a day, there are new fears the project will be further targeted by local people who are angered by the decision.

In particular, Sunraysia Daily

was told yesterday, feelings are especially raw among NSW irrigators who have just suffered a second water allocation cut and may run out of water early next year.

Member for Mildura Russell Savage yesterday called for peace over the pumps.

“No-one is more disappointed about the decision than me but we must continue the protest as we have done . . . any criminal activity just brings discredit to the entire region.”

Water Minister John Thwaites yesterday denied he had ordered the Hattah Lakes pumps to be switched on.

Various environmental groups yesterday claimed responsibility for “piling on the pressure” to re-start environmental flows while Mr Thwaites has denied any involvement in the decision.

Local political candidates yesterday continued to pour scorn on the decision and suggested political involvement from the government in a bid to secure green preferences before next week’s poll.

“DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) is handling the situation, it is an operational matter for them,” spokesman

for Mr Thwaites, Geoff Fraser, said yesterday.

He said the Minister had been told the pumps were being switched on “as a courtesy”.

More than 14 gigalitres of environmental flows are being used to “revive” one of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission’s identified icon site at Hattah.

The pumps were switched off last Friday to the applause of people in the local area while the government said it would consider the results of the Prime Minister’s Water Summit earlier in the week.

The DSE late Wednesday ordered the pumps re-started to complete the final five gigalitres of watering.

A DSE spokesman yesterday said there had been no political interference in the decision to re-start the pumping.

“The government is in caretaker mode but the decision had already been made . . . this is just completing the job.”

Mr Savage said the decision was plainly wrong.

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“The bureaucrats have a fixation, they have the water and they want to use it. They are so removed from the reality of what is happening up here, they don’t understand.”

Liberal candidate for Mildura, Gavin Sedgmen, believes continuing flooding of water into the lakes is “bloody crazy”.

“The water going in now is going to spread over the shallow areas and will simply be lost to evaporation,” he said yesterday.

“The trees have had a drink, their bellies are full – more water is simply a waste.”

Nationals candidate Peter Crisp claimed it was a political stunt

to appease the Green vote in Melbourne.

“This decision is not based on common sense and will not solve the environmental problems the Hattah Lakes are facing.

“All this will do is create further tension and upset within the Sunraysia and Riverland region where there is already considerable stress when it comes to horticulture.

“Irrigators who have had their entitlements cut wonder how on earth the Victorian Government can pump water into shallow lakes to evaporate. The community is really on edge about this and the Government have no care or consideration for an alternative point of view,” Mr Crisp said.

Those environmental groups yesterday denied a deal had been made for preferences.

Environment Victoria’s Healthy Rivers Campaign director Dr Paul Sinclair said great pressure had been applied on Mr Thwaites and the DSE to have the pumps restarted.

“We think it is fantastic news,” he said.

Both Environment Victoria and the Australian Conservation Foundation jointly celebrated the decision yesterday.

“The water being pumped into Hattah is a drop in the ocean compared to irrigation water use, but it is absolutely vital if Hattah is going to have a chance at survival. The water is part of a

water entitlement held by the Victorian Government on behalf of the environment and subject to the same rules and limitations as equivalent licences held by irrigators,” Dr Sinclair said.

He said the water amounted to half of one percent of the water used for irrigation in Sunraysia annually or less than the water used on the wine grapes left to rot on the ground last season.

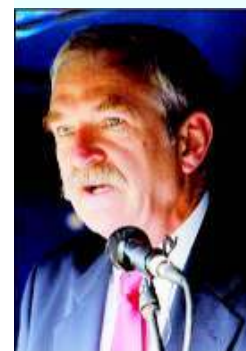
“Irrigators around Mildura led the nation by donating water to the Murray River last season. That’s real stewardship of the river that we need more of,” said Dr Arlene Buchan, ACF Healthy Rivers Campaigner.



• The pumps in action at Hattah Lakes earlier this month. Photograph by Richard Smart.



• Gavin Sedgmen



• Russell Savage