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Transcript

Stuck in the pipeline: North-South project doesn't hold water

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Reporter: Guy Stayner

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HEATHER EWART, PRESENTER: As the North South Pipeline project enters the final straight, it's hit a hurdle this week with the Opposition parties joining forces to overturn regulations that give the Government the right to pump water to Melbourne. The Government is guaranteeing 75 billion litres of water for Melbourne, but as another irrigation season begins, farmers' water allocation is zero. Guy Stayner reports.

KEN PATTISON, IRRIGATOR: The pipeline to Melbourne will prove to be the biggest white elephant of this century.

TIM HOLDING, WATER MINISTER: This is a misunderstood project. Let's be clear about this.

STEVE POSSELT, ACTIVIST: We have a river that doesn't get to the end. It's dying. It's getting shorter and shorter and shorter. And now Melbourne's gonna take water out of it through a pipeline that I can walk through! I just don't see the logic in it.

GUY STAYNER, REPORTER: Steve Posselt is an engineer and knows the Goulburn River better than most. He's been getting an up close view for weeks.

STEVE POSSELT: I'm paddling from Echuca to Melbourne.

GUY STAYNER: He has kayaked along the Murray Darling and written a book about it. Now he's literally paddling upstream to witness the food bowl modernisation project first hand and continue the seemingly forlorn fight against the North South Pipeline.

STEVE POSSELT: I just cannot see where the savings are. You can't make water. It was always an ambitious project. Spend \$2 billion to improve water efficiency in Australia's food bowl, and share the water spoils between the environment, the irrigators and the city.

KEN PATTISON: The projected water savings when this was initially announced was 225 gicalitres of water in which the irrigators would receive 75 gicalitres, the environment 75

gigalitres and of course the North South Pipeline 75 gigalitres.

GUY STAYNER: But ultimately, the project is underpinned by rain and it has remained depressingly dry ever since it commenced. Rain was forecast for much of Victoria this week, but while the clouds in Shepparton promised much, they delivered little. So what happens when there are theoretical water savings already allocated to the North South Pipeline and very little water in Lake Eildon to pay the water debt? Lake Eildon is only 18 per cent full.

GRAEME HANNAN, GOUBLURN MURRAY WATER: If in the forthcoming irrigation season is another bad season, then the volume that will be available for all users, including the volume to (inaudible) for Melbourne will be diminished.

GUY STAYNER: While Goulburn Murray Water executives are cautious in talking about the pipeline, former board member Ken Pattison is more blunt in his assessment.

KEN PATTISON: Unless there's substantial rains in the next two and a half months that improves the resource availability in Eildon, there will be no water for the pipeline. And if the Premier pushes the button to start that water going to Melbourne when the rural towns and the irrigators are on - currently on zero allocation, critical human needs, it will send a very bad message to the rural people of Victoria.

GUY STAYNER: Still, the Government remains adamant the pipeline will deliver its full quota to Melbourne.

Are you guaranteeing that the 75 gigalitres will flow next year?

TIM HOLDING: Yes. Melbourne will get 75 gigalitres of water from the North South Pipeline. And I might say: Melbourne needs that water next year.

GUY STAYNER: And in an election year, so will the Government.

GARY GODWILL, IRRIGATOR: They'll be ready to fire up possibly as early as mid February and that is when we are going to be screaming for water, won't be able to get it and Brumby will start the pumps. I wouldn't like to be Brumby. I wouldn't like to be anyone in food bowl when that actually happens.

GUY STAYNER: Goulburn Valley irrigators like Gary Godwill are currently sitting on zero water allocation. He says Australians could soon be buying imported pears.

GARY GODWILL: It flies in the face of logic because we're big food producers here. You give a megalitre of water to a farmer, he'll turn it into food. But you give a megalitre of water to somebody in the city and they'll send it out to the ocean as sewerage.

GUY STAYNER: How can you guarantee the 75 gigs coming out of Lake Eildon when there's virtually no water in Lake Eildon?

TIM HOLDING: The water that will be allocated next year is water that is already been saved or already in the system, either through the Eildon water quality reserve or through the other accounts that are available to the Government.

GUY STAYNER: But those other accounts and how the Government makes them add up to the magical 75 gigalitres has been in dispute ever since the project was announced. With water

savings from the so called "food bowl modernisation project" yet to flow, most of the water that will initially fill the pipeline will be drawn from earlier projects and commitments, or depends on savings that so far only exist on paper.

GRAEME HANNAN: So we've made a provisional estimate of what those savings are. That estimate will be audited and there is a process being worked through now where those auditors are being appointed, and that volume will be announced publicly by October.

GUY STAYNER: So why can't you say roughly what those savings are now?

GRAEME HANNAN: Look, I'm not prepared to say that because I want that announcement to be made after the audit is completed.

TIM HOLDING: Let's give the system an opportunity to run and for us a chance to see what savings have been achieved.

GUY STAYNER: While neither the Minister nor water authorities will say how much water is expected to be saved in the coming season, any savings depend on rain in what most predict will be another dry year.

KEN PATTISON: They can't tell you because, tragically, the figures are not coming up to their expectations. The savings aren't there. We've said all along they weren't there and therefore the fundamental parameters of the new water, everyone is a winner, has fallen away.

GUY STAYNER: When the food bowl project was announced, work to stop the leaks and wastage in the irrigation district around Shepparton was already underway. The Government plans to put savings from that work into its pipeline. The Opposition says it's water that was previously promised to restore environmental flows in the Murray and Snowy Rivers.

GREG BARBER, GREENS: Remember that promise? Couldn't have been a more high profile exercise. 21 per cent of the Snowy's flow will be restored. And Bob Carr and Steve Bracks went up to the headwaters, got their photo taken, jumped over the river. And what are we getting today? A few per cent.

GUY STAYNER: While Lake Eildon lies almost empty, 30 billion litres of water has been kept in reserve to guard against environmental problems stemming from the drought. The Government wants to take a third of the Eildon environmental reserve for its pipeline.

PETER HALL, NATIONAL PARTY: This water quality reserve is a small fraction of the volume of water stored in Eildon that are used for environmental purposes when we have an environmental problem to address like blue green algae.

GUY STAYNER: Opposition to the pipe has struggled to find a city voice, but the argument resonated in Parliament this week when the Liberals, Nationals, DLP and the Greens joined forces to block changes that would allow water to flow into the pipeline. The State Environment Minister Gavin Jennings did not speak against the motion. The Greens say the Government is disingenuous, claiming the vote denies water for the environment.

GREG BARBER: A 75 gigalitre entitlement times zero per cent allocation equals zero water! The practical effect of this bulk entitlement passing now for this coming season is zero.

GUY STAYNER: The pipeline is nearing completion and the massive pumping station at Killingworth just north of Yea is under construction and ahead of schedule. Opponents say the great irony of the project is that if Lake Eildon ever has enough water to justify sending 75 gigalitres a year to Melbourne, the odds are Melbourne's reservoirs won't need topping up. Unlike the rivers, the ill feeling runs deep.

GARY GODWILL: See you in the 2010 election, Mr Brumby. We're gonna roll you. Never been elected and never will be!

HEATHER EWART: Guy Stayner with that report.

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