

MEDIA RELEASE**LEE CALLS FOR IRRIGATORS' "WATER BANK"**

Country Alliance party candidates Danny Lee and Fred Goodwin have called for the establishment of a "water bank" in Victoria's northern irrigation district, to enable farmers to take control of water trade from within their districts.

Lee, who will be contesting the Northern Victoria Region at this year's state election, said irrigation communities needed to establish a network of water banks. He said these would run along similar lines to the community banking network and will be speaking with a major bank about his proposal this week.

"Irrigators needed to be involved at board level, setting and advising on the rules and conditions which give the best outcomes for the irrigation districts and the water banking organisation," he said.

"This way, the water bought within a district, at market price, can remain owned within that district, and whoever leases the water would meet their obligations to maintain infrastructure in that district."

Mr Lee said that to recover the costs, the water could be temporarily traded or leased out annually to other farmers, the environment or for urban use.

"The important part of this system is that the ownership of the water remains within the district of origin," he said.

"When times change for the better, and young farmers want to take up farming within that district on those already existing farms with infrastructure at the farm gate, the water could be leased by the community to them until they are established and can afford to purchase it," he said.

Mr Lee says farmers are currently being forced to sell off water just to survive, or relocate off their farm with some chance of a fresh start. He said the water mostly ends up leaving the district which then exposes those remaining irrigators to increased costs to maintain the district infrastructure which has devastating results for rural towns and regional economies.

“This water is seized upon by the vultures of farming, large corporate investment funds, and transferred away to new irrigation developments,” he said.

“Any profits from these developments leave rural Victoria and make their way to the source of the investment, generally the cities. There is also another increasing buyer of this water, urban water authorities, who want to source water to meet increasing demand from their customers.”

Mr Lee is conducting talks with irrigation farmers, rural and regional communities to see if there is enough support for this concept to go ahead.

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