Hysterical claims drown out the facts on water

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The South Australian election has temporarily benched the political struggle over water use in the Murray-Darling.

That region, responsible for over 35 per cent of Australia’s agricultural output, has become a political football with farmers facing pressure from greens and green academics.

In 1995, around 11,000 of the system’s 32,000 gigalitres were allocated to farmers (about 2,500 gigalitres is for drinking water) when state governments agreed to issue no more irrigation licences.

Green activists then orchestrated hysterical claims focusing on the state of the river. “Our continent is falling apart”, said the catastropharian Tim Flannery-led “Wentworth Group of concerned scientists”. Other bloodcurdling assertions claimed, “salt is destroying the rivers and land like a cancer”, and that animals and plants were facing extinction.

None of this was true – land salinity, for example, affects only 0.4 per cent of Australia, almost all of it due to natural salt outcrops. And, a century of Murray-Darling dam building and the accompanying management has replaced the irregular, salt infused waterway that the explorer like Charles Sturt found in the 1820s, with today’s continuously flowing river.

In addition to being driven by green fictions, the Murray-Darling water policy also seeks to ensure freshwater in the lakes at the Murray mouth. Ironically, that water allocation actually modifies nature by feeding lakes would be naturally salt water some of the time – and at a cost of some $7.5 billion!

Green activists and their academic supporters have continuously raised the ante on the amount of water they want to take from farmers to remedy concocted environmental ills.

In 2002 they sought 1,500 gigalitres of irrigators’ water (14 per cent of the total) and the Howard Government settled for 450 gigalitres.

The millennial drought brought now disproven claims that rainfall was diminishing. Water for irrigators was reduced by 2,750 (25 per cent of the previous allocation) in 2012. Current discussions are whether to make this 2,300 or to continue strangling the food bowl by raising it to 3,400 gigalitres. Meanwhile the green activists are already preparing the ground for taking back 7,000 gigalitres, almost two thirds of irrigators’ water.

Unsurprisingly, the reduced availability of water has contributed to a rise in its price – after adjusting for inflation it now sells for 2-4 times what it did 20 years ago.

Attracted by such high values and by government funded buyouts, many farmers have, understandably, been complicit by selling water rights for unproductive uses to the detriment of agriculture generally.

Water is crucial to all agriculture and irrigation is the only way its steady availability can be ensured in much of Australia, the world’s driest continent. If 20 or 40 per cent of water is taken from Murray Darling irrigators, their production potential in Australia’s most important agricultural province will be close to 20 or 40 per cent lower.
This is especially significant since politicians often trumpet the great agricultural opportunities presented by booming Asian economies. But they fail to make the connection between supplying these markets and the regulations they impose preventing farmers from providing that supply.

Regulations are throttling the Murray Darling region. The rest of Australia which supplies goods and services to the area faces consequent losses but most politicians are either asleep at the wheel or part of the problem. *Alan Moran is with Regulation Economics.*