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Endangered Wetlands Report Card – Emergency Response Required

The Inland Rivers Network has welcomed the Commonwealth's ten point plan for water and urged emergency action to save critically endangered wetlands.

"Let's hope the legacy of poor decision making and lack of political will soon be behind us because emergency measures are needed to save our wetlands and strong leadership is a must," said Amy Hankinson, Coordinator of the Inland Rivers Network.

The call comes as the Inland Rivers Network releases its wetland report card, which labels almost all iconic wetlands in inland NSW as endangered.

"Our floodplain wetlands are in ecological freefall and some are on the brink of collapse – we have already lost 90 per cent of the wetlands in the Murray Darling Basin to overextraction upstream," Ms Hankinson said.

"Many of our wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin are internationally recognised for their environmental value and as such we have an obligation to protect them and the wildlife that depend on them. This includes birds that regularly fly more than 15,000 kilometres to return to these marshes and wetlands every year."

"However, Australia is currently failing its international obligations – so far governments have bungled attempts to ensure the wise use of these wetlands and now internationally listed Ramsar wetlands such as the Macquarie Marshes and Gwydir wetlands are endangered."

"The Prime Minister has promised he will tackle the water issue head on and this must mean emergency measures to return water to these wetlands – we cannot wait another decade," she said.

"The Government must buy back water from willing sellers on the market so when it finally rains the wetlands can get a well earned drink. If they don't, we could lose them forever."

"The Federal package must focus on getting the necessary ecological outcomes or it will all be in vain."

"These wetlands have been suffering from an artificial drought for too long as they have lost out on their 'bread and butter' flows. In some years as much as 80 per cent of the water is taken from the river. It is not just the big floods that are important. We need action that provides them with water in the intervening years as well."

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Bryce Woods, a young farmer with a property just west of Moree, has for years despaired about the state of the wetlands on his and his families' properties.

We have been telling the NSW Government for years about the huge damage that their policies and inactions have caused by allowing too much water to be taken out of the river. Many people have already suffered and had to leave the land or completely change what they do as there was no help forthcoming – the water was just given to irrigators upstream," he lamented.

"I love the wetlands and wildlife on my property – the Gwydir wetlands are a glorious area. They are in serious trouble but the Federal Government may be the saviour with its ten point plan – my only hope is that the plan can deliver, and quickly, because things are pretty crook out here".

Great Egret



Photographer: Peter Merritt

The Great Egret is the largest of the Australian egrets. It breeds in the springtime in large colonies and is found in many of the iconic wetlands of inland NSW and the Murray Darling Basin.

The egret migrates from Asia to Australia and is protected under an international migratory agreement due to its international significance.

However, numbers of Great Egrets are declining, along with other waterbirds. Since the early 1980s average bird numbers have fallen by nearly 80 per cent.

The breeding grounds and feeding sites of waterbirds such as the Great Egret depend on regular flooding. Dramatic declines in waterbirds are not surprising as changes in river flows have resulted in the loss of 90 per cent of floodplain wetlands in the Murray Darling Basin, which in turn has reduced opportunities and sites for breeding. In the Macquarie Marshes for example there are around 100,000 fewer nests than there were 11 years ago.

Many of our waterbirds are facing disaster, and our wetlands are now critically endangered. We have not only a national but a global responsibility to protect these birds and wetlands of international significance.

For more information contact Amy Hankinson on (02) 8270 9904 or 0407 279 088, or Bryce Woods on 0429 441 976.