

Farm anger at dam water charges

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WATER authorities will press ahead with plans to charge Adelaide Hills farmers for using water from their dams.

An updated plan to be released today will call for dams and bores used for commercial purposes in the western Mt Lofty Ranges to be metered.

Furious farmers fear the move will open the way to more costly regulation. The plan requires 2144 existing users to obtain water licences for dams and bores, but South Australian Farmers Federation chairman Peter White says this is just the beginning.

"The fear is if that principle is allowed to persist, where does it stop? How many more will be captured in that?" he said. "Most people will accept water is a precious commodity - it has to be managed and it's everybody's responsibility - but the way it's managed and some of the principles applied have really got up people's noses."

Dams and bores "used for commercial purposes" would be metered under the plan, but water "for stock and domestic use" will not. Mr White said farmers were concerned about bearing the cost of infrastructure, including separate sets of pipes running off the one dam.

The Hills farmers would join about 2000 commercial water users in the Barossa Valley, Northern Adelaide Plains and McLaren Vale areas in paying for rainwater under the proposal.

The final plan, which will be sent to the State Government for approval later this year, outlines a distinction between water for stock and domestic versus commercial use.

"The way it's presented at the moment, if a cow comes down and drinks directly out of the dam, you don't have to pay," Mr White said.

"If you pump that water out of the dam and on to the ground to make the grass grow for the cow, you have to pay. It's one of the principles that actually stinks."

From July 1, 2013, the board is likely to charge a levy on water taken for commercial purposes. The levy will be used to help manage natural resources in the region.

The rate is expected to be "the same as, or similar to, other prescribed areas in the Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges region" at 1c per kl. For an annual allocation of 10 million litres, this equates to \$100 a year if the total allocation is used.

Regional manager Kym Good said similar arrangements were in place for irrigators on the River Murray, in the state's South-East, Eyre Peninsula and Clare Valley.

"What you do when you put in a water allocation plan is, you start to put controls on the way the water is managed," he said.

"It's not about ownership, it's the way you manage and share water . . . to protect existing users, to protect our public water supply and protect the environment."

Cattle producer Ross Leckie, from Charleston, irrigates pasture from a dam and a bore. He says he will have to spend "quite a bit of money getting set up with meters and all the paraphernalia and plumbing".

"I'm cranky about the fact that it's more government regulation, which inevitably - particularly with the incompetent governments we have - inevitably is just bloody wasteful," he said.

"But controlling water demonstrably in Australia is a necessity . . . Water's a finite resource and it appears the only way we can control it is to meter things, be more precise about the usage and protect legitimate users who have been using water for years in their agricultural business into the future."

All states and territories have to complete water allocation plans as part of the National Water Reform Agenda.

In South Australia, regional Natural Resources Management Boards prepare water allocation plans where an area has been prescribed.

Environment Minister Paul Caica says there are 27 water resource management areas in SA where at least one type of water resource has been prescribed.

"Meters are an integral part of sustainably managing water resources," he said.

"People who have a water licence and allocation are generally required to pay a Natural Resources Management water levy. However, this does not apply to people taking water for domestic purposes or for watering stock not subject to intensive farming. The levy goes to the Natural Resources Management Boards."