

# Experience down the drain

By **Ben Brennan**

FEARS are growing over South Australia's ability to deliver hundreds of millions of dollars worth of water efficiency projects, with as many as 44 jobs lost to the State's water department over the past three years.

The South Australia Public Service Association (PSA) says 44 staff have been cut from the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resource's (DEWNR) water section since 2010 and the sacking of former State Water Minister Paul Caica added to the confusion.

Murray Bridge farmer and former Lower Murray Irrigation Association chairman Richard Reedy said agriculturalists were shocked by the sacking of Mr Caica earlier this year.

"There's disappointment that he is being moved around to satisfy factions and sections within the government ... we're aware that the government is gutting the water department," Mr Reedy said.

"Now the big question comes as to what practical people will be there to train a new minister."

Mr Reedy said the water portfolio had been a big learning curve for Mr Caica, as it had been for his predecessor Karlene Maywald, which required significant input from irrigators.

He said it was vital to have experienced public servants in place to assist the new minister, Ian Hunter.

Mr Reedy said many people within the community were frustrated by the prospect of waiting for the new minister to come to grips with the diverse and politically-sensitive portfolio at a time when the State needed to oversee the delivery of about \$200 million worth of efficiency projects.

In a State Government reshuffle, Mr Caica was ousted from his water and River Murray portfolios earlier this year to make way for Mr Hunter.

PSA chief industrial officer Peter Christopher said the union's records showed 44 positions had been lost in the DEWNR water section since 2010, while member for Hammond Adrian Pederick - who once held the shadow water portfolio - said the Opposition was also concerned about the Government's ability to deliver millions of dollars worth of federally funded efficiency projects as part of the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

"Let's just hope that what's left of the

department takes on a lot of local input because we have this lack of knowledge in the department," Mr Pederick said.

Mr Pederick said the Opposition was aware of significant cuts to DEWNR's water section but said it could not confirm the extent.

A spokeswoman for the new minister, Ian Hunter, confirmed there had been job losses, however, she disputed the numbers put forward by the PSA.

"I am advised that for the former Department of Water as a whole - 23 permanent positions were the subject of targeted voluntary separation packages over the period in question (from 2010)," she said.

The spokeswoman stood by the department's ability to deliver Basin Plan projects, saying they had been made a top priority and that the department was investing in the training and development of people in key roles.

"The department has demonstrated its strength and depth through the development of the Basin Plan response as well as the tough negotiations with upstream Basin States, the Commonwealth and the Murray Darling Basin Authority," she said.