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Funds threat on river control

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Water resources

THE federal Government has threatened to cut funding for a proposed \$417 million national water measuring and monitoring network if management of the Murray-Darling Basin is not handed to it.

The project, which is part of the Government's \$10 billion national water policy announced earlier this year, has prompted intense interest among water technology developers.

Private industry and research organisations, including the CSIRO and National ICT Australia (NICTA), have signalled interest in the \$417.2 million water resource information system project headed by the Bureau of Meteorology.

The fate of the project, including a \$24.9 million capital investment during the 2008 financial year, now rests on whether the Victorian Government agrees to cede control of the Murray-Darling Basin to the federal government.

"The Government will provide \$417.2 million over 10 years to the Bureau of Meteorology to improve the detail and scope of nationally available water information, which will allow the bureau to forecast, analyse and publicly report on water resource usage," the Government said in budget papers issued last week.

"This funding is conditional on the governance arrangements for the Murray-Darling Basin being placed on a national footing."

The federal Government called on the states and territories to hand over management of the Murray-Darling basin to the Commonwealth when it launched its \$10 billion water plan in January.

Victoria is the only state yet to agree to the proposal because of concerns about effects of the takeover on the state's irrigators.

The funding threat solidifies concerns among irrigation and water management specialists, including National Water Commission chief scientist Dr Colin Chartres, that the planned information system could be sunk by political wrangling.

Scientists from the NWC, CSIRO and NICTA have all said a national water measuring and monitoring system is essential if Australia is to solve its water crisis.

Bureau of Meteorology hydrology chief scientist Rob Vertessy said the agency had begun planning for the network in anticipation of a political agreement being reached.

Dr Vertessy, who was appointed to head the water information system project last month, said it was likely to be some time before major procurement would commence, should an agreement be reached.

"We envision engaging with all kinds of organisations to provide services: private sector, public sector, research and development agencies," he said. "The design of that is a bit of a way off. The first few years will be very development-intensive."

To meet project goals the Bureau of Meteorology would aim to recruit about 110 staff to its nascent water information division, Dr Vertessy said.

Staff would be located in capital cities around the country.

Some technology upgrades were slated to begin in the 2008 financial year.

A \$24.9 million 2007-08 Bureau of Meteorology capital works program, disclosed in last week's budget, will upgrade the organisation's computer infrastructure, imagery and data satellite receiving stations, and a radar rainfall network.

More than half of the \$417.2 million in bureau funding for the water information system will not be delivered until after the 2011 financial year.