



ADAM YIP

Robert McBride, 51, with his family, Kate, 18, Kat, 27, and James, 16, on the dry riverbed of the lower Darling at Tolarno station, near Menindee

River's history just a dry argument

ENVIRONMENT

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Where paddle steamers once plied the waters of the Darling River, there is now only sand.

The empty banks lined with century-old red gums cut through the boundary of Tolarno station like a giant excavation.

Robert McBride, whose family has owned the station since the 1940s, is furious. So much so that the nephew of a Menzies government minister has invited Greens leader Richard Di Natale to lunch on his property 45km south of Menindee, near Broken Hill.

And to underline his anger he has set up tables and chairs on the riverbed and offered the Greens entourage a BBQ meal of sausages and lamb chops as he describes to them what he calls an "environmental disaster".

Mr McBride says the lower



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Richard Di Natale in the lower Darling near Menindee

Darling is one of the most storied sections of the river. Burke and Wills stayed at Tolarno on their way to oblivion in the 1860s.

He says there were 12 paddle steamers on the river in the 1890s.

But there has been no water in this section of the Darling for the past five months despite rain.

Mr McBride and his neighbours blame policy over the

weather, arguing water is being held at Bourke to support irrigation while their properties are being left to wither on the vine.

Mr McBride blames the problem on "unsustainable agriculture" north of Bourke and in the lower Murray Darling catchments in Queensland.

"This is the biggest environmental stuff-up in the Murray-

Darling Basin. It is not drought, this is because of policy," he says.

Senator Di Natale said "until you touch the dirt under your feet it is hard to imagine what is happening here. It's a catastrophe."

The system needed to be managed "holistically". "The lower Darling is not even on the map," he said.

Earlier Senator Di Natale met Menindee residents who were angry that the Menindee Lakes were drained in 2012 and 2013, which they argue has undermined the water supply in Broken Hill.

NSW Water Minister Niall Blair said Broken Hill needed to "have a clean and secure drinking water supply to help its economy to prosper".

"Menindee is experiencing the lowest inflows on record, that's why the NSW government is investing hundreds of millions of dollars to secure the short and long-term water supply for Broken Hill and nearby communities."