Australian Government
Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Murray-Darling Association Conference 2023

The Murray—Darling Basin Plan – next steps

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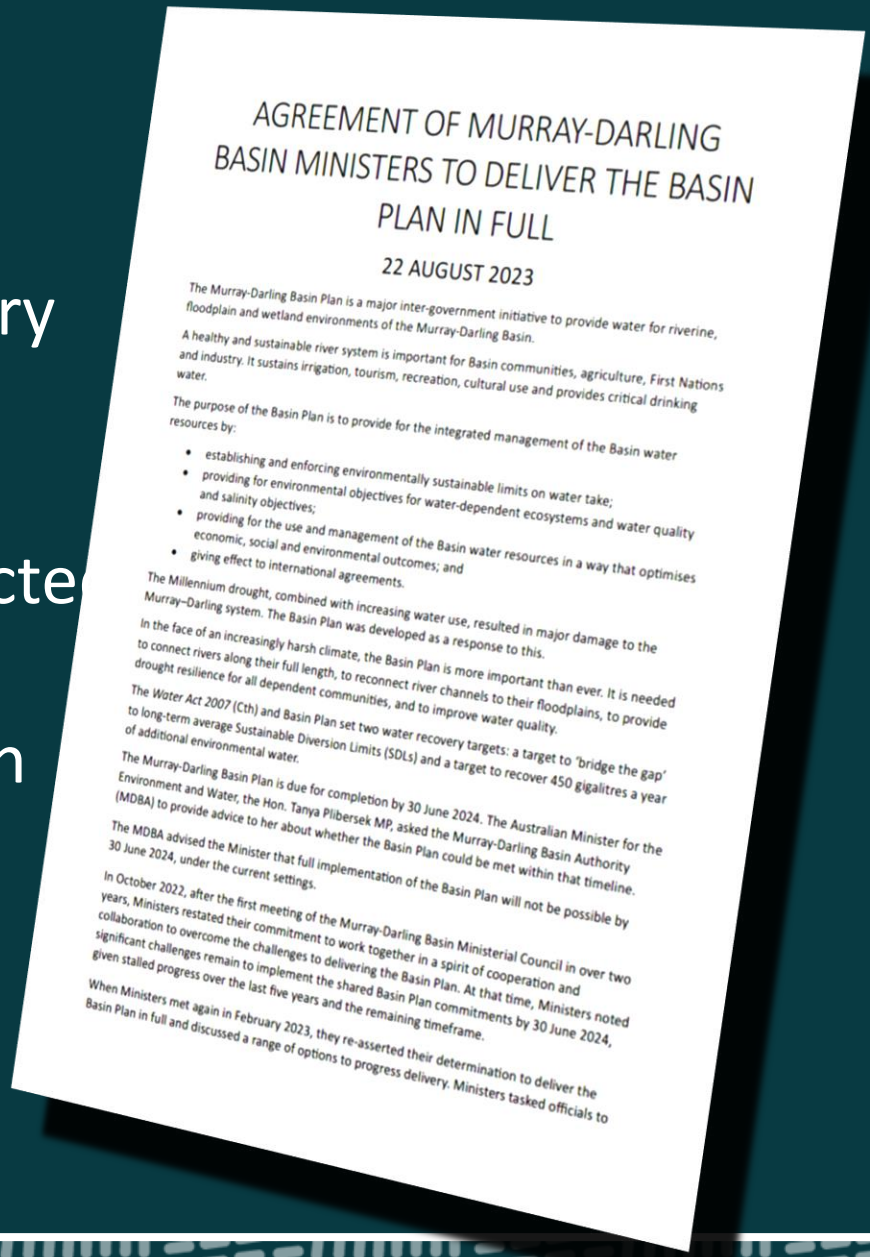
28 September 2023

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

Basin Plan Implementation

The Agreement

- **More time** to deliver the remaining water recovery targets
- **More options** to deliver the remaining water
- **More funding** to deliver water and support impacte communities
- **More accountability** for all Murray—Darling Basin governments
- **More flexibility** to bring forward new SDLAM projects.



AGREEMENT OF MURRAY-DARLING BASIN MINISTERS TO DELIVER THE BASIN PLAN IN FULL

22 AUGUST 2023

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan is a major inter-government initiative to provide water for riverine, floodplain and wetland environments of the Murray-Darling Basin.

A healthy and sustainable river system is important for Basin communities, agriculture, First Nations and industry. It sustains irrigation, tourism, recreation, cultural use and provides critical drinking water.

The purpose of the Basin Plan is to provide for the integrated management of the Basin water resources by:

- establishing and enforcing environmentally sustainable limits on water take;
- providing for environmental objectives for water-dependent ecosystems and water quality and salinity objectives;
- providing for the use and management of the Basin water resources in a way that optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes; and
- giving effect to international agreements.

The Millennium drought, combined with increasing water use, resulted in major damage to the Murray–Darling system. The Basin Plan was developed as a response to this.

In the face of an increasingly harsh climate, the Basin Plan is more important than ever. It is needed to connect rivers along their full length, to reconnect river channels to their floodplains, to provide drought resilience for all dependent communities, and to improve water quality.

The *Water Act 2007* (Cth) and Basin Plan set two water recovery targets: a target to 'bridge the gap' to long-term average Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) and a target to recover 450 gigalitres a year of additional environmental water.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan is due for completion by 30 June 2024. The Australian Minister for the Environment and Water, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP, asked the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) to provide advice to her about whether the Basin Plan could be met within that timeline.

The MDBA advised the Minister that full implementation of the Basin Plan will not be possible by 30 June 2024, under the current settings.

In October 2022, after the first meeting of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council in over two years, Ministers restated their commitment to work together in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration to overcome the challenges to delivering the Basin Plan. At that time, Ministers noted significant challenges remain to implement the shared Basin Plan commitments by 30 June 2024, given stalled progress over the last five years and the remaining timeframe.

When Ministers met again in February 2023, they re-asserted their determination to deliver the Basin Plan in full and discussed a range of options to progress delivery. Ministers tasked officials to

Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) bill 2023

The Water Amendment Bill will:

- **Provide additional time** for notified SDLAM projects
- **Provide flexibility** for what can be accounted against the 450 GL target
- **Repeal the 1500 GL purchase cap** to give us more options
- **Provide flexibility** for what can be funded out of the WESA to support a broader range of projects
- **Delay the Water Act review** until after the Basin Plan review is complete to ensure outcomes are considered and incorporated.

What We Heard - Ideas

- Improving river operations
- Delivering environmental water using infrastructure
- Alternative water supplies and new technologies
- Water savings projects
- Partnerships with landholders
- Protecting native fish
- Rule changes to improve ecological outcomes
- Water market solutions
- Metering monitoring and reporting

What We Heard - Views

- Greater flexibility in delivery
- Range of perspectives on water recovery solutions
- Socio-economic perspectives and importance of collaboration
- Preserving cultural heritage
- Acknowledgement of the role of science, data and expertise.

Alternative water supplies and new technologies

Alternative water supplies and new technologies can increase the amount of water available for consumption and for the environment, particularly during drought.

We heard ideas for alternative water supplies such as inter-basin transfers, groundwater, recycled water, desalination, and rainfall enhancement technology.

- Managed aquifer recharge (Cat 1* or 3)
- Moving Adelaide and/or other town/urban systems on to desalinated water, returning the river water for the environment (Cat 1*)
- Treat and recycle wastewater from outside the Basin for use in the basin (Cat 2 or 3)
- Build a pipe from Queensland rivers (not in the Murray–Darling Basin) for release into the Murray–Darling Basin. (Category 2 or 3)
- Invest in rainfall enhancement technologies (Cat 2 or 3)

'Recycling wastewater currently discharged at sea can provide long term water security for the [Murray-Darling Basin] MDB. This would require construction of a pipeline from Sydney to the closest entry point to the Murray–Darling System, probably near Bathurst, NSW.'
David Haynes (#35)

'...explore the potential for Managed Aquifer Recharge to contribute to efficient water management and increase regional water security throughout the Basin.'
Murray Darling Association Inc. (#84)

Options and technologies for alternative water supplies continue to be explored across Australian to improve water security in the face of climate change.

Alternative sources, such as desalination or recycled water, have the advantage of being a relatively 'drought proof' source to diversify from existing surface or groundwater supplies, as they can play an important role in improving water security. Alternative water sources can be costly to build, operate and maintain, impacting customer affordability. These schemes can also require environmental planning assessment and approval. Disposal of hypersaline brine from desalination is an ongoing environmental issue that needs to be considered.

Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR) involves the pumping of water into groundwater aquifers (during wetter periods or flooding), for future use by communities during periods of drought. The management of recharging aquifers is an evolving field with unclear potential in the Murray–Darling Basin.

The Australian Government's National Water Grid Authority Science Program is currently assessing MAR opportunities for agriculture. One completed project by the Science Program is a preliminary study that has identified aquifer storage potential at 15 sites, with 6 areas identified as having potential aquifer storage equal to or greater than 50 gigaltres.

Alternative water supplies and emerging technologies have the potential to change how water is managed in the future. These ideas could enable less water to be taken from Basin water resources for consumption, leaving more water for the environment. Due to the long lead times, legislated timeframes would need to be extended.

- One page per group
- Ideas listed and categorised
- Relevant quotes
- Summary on:
  - similar ideas we have invested in
  - some known challenges and opportunities.

Implementation – initial thinking

1) Resilient Rivers Program

- A refreshed approach
- Supports a range of infrastructure options
- Range of procurement approaches
- Design for maximum flexibility

2) Voluntary Water Purchase and Sustainable Communities Program

- Voluntary purchase of water entitlements from willing sellers
- Community adjustment assistance

Next steps

- Work with BOC subcommittee to consider which ideas can be supported by the new pathway (Water Amendment Bill)
- Implement new process for SDLAM projects
- Engage with peak stakeholders on the proposed 450 GL framework and programs including new options.

Public Webinar: Restoring Our Rivers Bill 2023

- We will be hosting a public webinar about the Water Amendment Bill 2023 on **Wednesday 11 October 2023, 11:30am**.

- The webinar will provide information about the proposed changes in the Bill – Basin Plan amendments and reforms in the Murray-Darling Basin water markets.

Register now!


Questions?