



MDA BOARD COMMUNIQUE

Release Date: 1/03/2024

The Murray Darling Association Board met on 28 February 2024 in person on Ngunnawal Country (Canberra). The Board engaged in discussion with the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Senator Perin Davey, and MDBA Executive Director River Management Andrew Reynolds.

During the first Board Meeting of 2024, the Murray Darling Association (MDA) Board discussed progress on the preparation of the 2024 National Conference, Tamworth 8 – 11 July, as well as the 2024 Basin Water Forum, Mildura 2 May. The MDA Board also began a process to review its Constitution, a process initiated during its 2023 Annual General Meeting, as well as reengaged an ongoing process of MDA Region Border review.

Convening in Canberra for the meeting of the Board, the MDA engaged with the Federal Minister for the Environment and Water, Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, the Federal Shadow Minister for Water, Senator Perin Davey, as well as the outgoing MDBA Executive Director River Management, Mr Andrew Reynolds.

MDA Board Chairs and Member representatives reflected on current and ongoing issues and points of interest within the Murray-Darling Basin (the Basin), with a strong focus on the Federal Government's progressing plans regarding water purchasing program.

Meeting with the Federal Minister for the Environment and Water, the Hon Tanya Plibersek provided an update on the Association's advocacy on the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023, which included 11 recommendations for Federal Government.

The Minister indicated that the Federal Government was well underway into addressing the recommendations to meet water demands with less water, and to reduce non-riparian Local Government reliance on the Murray-Darling Basin, with **\$103M included in the last budget to redo the science** to address the changing climate, as well as through the Resilient Rivers program.

Additionally, the Minister indicated that the Federal Government was addressing the recommendations by the MDA regarding the opportunities for water efficiency using on-farm efficiency funds, as well as the inclusion of Local Government in dialogue and planning, with the Government exploring the opportunities available, including **reviewing the use of Desalination Plants**, as well as ensuring an ongoing focus on the **inclusion of Local Government in dialogue and planning**.

The Minister did note that the Federal Government was actively addressing the recommendation to ensure ongoing public quarterly reporting by Governments, with a **range of measures having been passed** in 2023 to **increase accountability**, and that the Federal Government was ensuring that Maintaining the Triple bottom line approach, as well as Community impacts, reconciliation of the latest science, and a renewed focus on actions was addressed, with the Minister indicating that Restoring our Rivers was built around balancing **socio, economic, and environmental**.

The Minister did indicate that the MDA's recommendation of legislating of the volume of floodplain harvesting **could not be done** under the current plan, and that the implementation of all recommendations from the NSW Natural Resources Commission in relation to Long Term Average Annual Extraction Limits was more something to be addressed by the NSW Government. The MDA is exploring further engagement opportunities between Federal and State Governments and the MDA to achieve the goals of the recommendation.



“We are looking to provide you with direction as end users, show you what we are feeling.” – MDA Board

The MDA Board further engaged with Minister Plibersek across a range of points of interest, including the management of over-recovered water from the Macquarie Valley, Dam Operation and governance, water purchasing framework, as well as the importance of Water security and Water storage for Basin communities.

While the Minister indicated that over-recovered water from the Macquarie Valley did not count towards any of the currently standing targets, the MDA National President, Mayor Craig Davies provided an alternate use for the water, if it cannot be returned to the Macquarie Valley, that it be utilised for Indigenous, or cultural heritage purposes. The Minister Plibersek had indicated that this utilisation of water had not been considered.

Discussions with the Minister also raised the management and operating rules for the Hume and Dartmouth Dams, raising the possibility of amending the operating rules to account for the level of the Dartmouth Dam to further mitigate the risks of flooding as seen in the 2022 Flood event.

The Federal Minister noted that the Apls Ministerial Council had been reestablished to address the management of Wild Horses, particularly within the Kosciuszko National Park, as raised by the MDA in past recommendations, and that the NSW State Government had the full support of the Federal Government.

The MDA raised the planned water purchasing across the Murray-Darling Basin with the Federal Minister indicating the need for further information to understand how much water would be targeted in the Basins catchments and valleys, noting that the framework provided by the Government did not indicate how much water was to be purchased from each of the catchments.

“The Federal Government is working closely with Irrigation networks to minimise the impact of water [the Federal Government] are purchasing” – Hon Tanya Plibersek MP

Minister Plibersek indicated that the Federal Government was currently going out for consultation, noting that this is likely to be the best way to provide this information. The Minister raised the recent voluntary water purchases, noting that the Federal Government had received a lot of offers, had tested the market, and had found that water holders were willing to sell water.

“Bulk of Water Purchasing will need to come from the south, as that is where the bulk of the water is.” – Hon Tanya Plibersek MP

The Minister indicated to the MDA Board that rules and processes in the approach to the purchasing of water in the Northern Basin, as well as the Southern Basin would need to be different, acknowledging that water storage, and water availability differed across the Murray-Darling Basin.

The MDA Board noted that one of the most important aspects of the planned water purchasing was what came after the water was purchased, indicating that one of the main drivers for industry, and for communities, was the fear of the unknown.

“We know there is going to be another drought, this is what drives me. It is an immense effort, challenge, to prepare for this.” – Hon Tanya Plibersek MP

The Board noted the successes of towns and cities, such as in Adelaide, where councils and communities had engaged in Water efficiency initiatives to capture and reuse rain/storm water, and noted the great opportunity available in reducing water surface areas to combat water loss to evaporation, making reference to wetlands that used to be ephemeral, but now held permanent water.

Minister Plibersek commended the Murray Darling Association’s engagement with the Federal Government and the Board, noting that “[the Government] need to know what information is getting through, and where more information is needed...”

Following the meeting with Minister Plibersek, the MDA Board engaged with the Shadow Minister for Water, Senator Perin Davey addressing the same points of interest and concerns as was discussed with Minister Plibersek.

“Reforms on buybacks raises concerns.” – Senator Perin Davey

Senator Davey indicated to the MDA Board that, during the discussion of the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023, she had hoped to gain support for amendments to the Water Amendment Bill prior to its passing to enable a review, noting that this had not succeeded.

The Senator had also highlighted how greatly water is being valued by water holders, with only 26GL of the sought 200GL+ purchased by the Federal Government.

The Senator raised the query during discussion with the MDA Board that if the goals of the 450GL, maintaining the Coorong and Lower Lakes, could be achieved with 150GL less water, why would the Federal Government continue to seek the full 450GL.

During discussions with the MDA Board regarding water delivery problems, and disaster impacts on Basin Communities, Shadow Minister Water Policy Advisor, Tom Rooney, raised the recent mass fish kills, as well as the recently release carp impact paper, noting the immense impact on river ecology by the carp.

“It is important we don’t lose sight of the management of the Basin beyond water Buybacks.” – Tom Rooney

During discussion Senator Davey noted frustration that the Federal Government was not adequately addressing the importance of where the water was needed, that there was too strong a focus on numbers, with the onus being placed on communities to prove that they had ben affected by water purchasing, identifying this as a difficult task for communities lacking the funding to complete the needed research to prove this.

Discussing the ongoing issue of Water Security and Water Storage in Basin communities, Senator Davey expressed that community growth is stymied when communities cannot be confident their water supply will be permanent, noting that the focus of the Basin Plan had been away from urban water needs.

The MDA Board raised the Sustainable Rivers Review with the Minister, noting concern that correspondence received by the Board indicated that no new science would be done, only the review of old science and data. Senator Davey indicated that 100 new staff had been allocated to the project, noted frustration that they would be using outdated data for the Sustainable Rivers Review.

“It is good to have the safety of the Basin Plan for crisis times, ... but it stymies growth.” – Senator Davey

The Senator noted an interest in the development of a management plan for the Basin, with the management of the Basin dependant on whether the year was wet or dry.

During the Meeting with the Senator, the MDA Board noted the association’s position within the network of the Murray-Darling Basin communities, indicating that it had a unique, and immensely beneficial connection to Local Government and communities that could be utilised by Federal Government, Opposition, and by Government Departments, Authorities, and Agencies, much like the MDA’s engagement with the CSIRO, to consult in a much more efficient, and timely basis than past consultation processes.

The MDA Board, concluding its meeting with the Senator, noted that there was strong support within South Australian Communities for the Healthy Coorong, Healthy basin to become a SDLAM, with noted Council, scientist, and indigenous support. Senator Davey expressed that in Government, community-led projects are sought for, however that when they come forward, it is often decided that the project is too hard. The Senator noted that this project would get the environmental outcomes that the Basin Plan is for.



Finally, The MDA Board had the opportunity to engage with the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) outgoing Executive Director for River Management, Andrew Reynolds regarding key issues of the Basin, including Water security, Storage management, and Water Delivery.

The Executive Director noted that, while concerns and predictions of a drier conditions, and the year had proven much wetter than predicted, it was still too soon for airspace releases. Mr Reynolds noted that there were still challenges of managing shortfall risks, making reference to the Barmah Choke, and indicated that there were no quick silver-bullet, fixes.

“[The MDBA is] reviewing options to remove the sand from the Barmah Choke, however this is very difficult...” – Executive Director Andrew Reynolds

During discussions, Mr Reynolds indicated to the Board that there were currently a number of favourable options regarding the management of the Barmah Choke, such as utilising Lake Boga, and working with Water NSW to use the Murrumbidgee. Mr Reynolds made note that the MDBA was also engaging with Murray Irrigation with the possibility of using their systems. Further discussion regarding the use of other channels to alleviate the Barmah Choke indicated that the MDBA saw this as very difficult and not a current focus.

Discussions with Mr Reynolds raised the possibility of Micro Hydro projects along the basin’s River systems, with such projects showing success across the globe. Projects such those found in Switzerland, it was identified by Mr Reynolds, required large infrastructure, as well as a local need for electricity, making many projects not financially viable under current circumstances.

“The MDBA needs to accommodate for variability.” – Executive Director Andrew Reynolds

Focussing on the adaptation of current plans to accommodate Climate Change, Mr Reynolds noted that the MDBA, in the past had relied heavily on historical accounts, historical statistics, and climate drivers, noting that this was helpful in a long-term system, but does not help in a short-term one. It was identified that this was the same issue that would be encountered with lowering the Hume Dam level in preparation for increased rainfall within the year.

Discussing the CSIRO prediction of 30% less water in the Basin by 2050-60, Mr Reynolds noted that the current system and policy was a good starting point, that from a governance perspective, it was not all about markets, and indicated that what was incumbered upon the MDBA was to give those markets as much information as possible to allow for an informed decision. Mr Reynolds noted that you can’t solve the problem, but you can provide as much information as possible to enable an informed decision.

“Governments will provide as much information as they can, so that the decisions made, whether right or wrong, were made with as much information as possible.” – Executive Director Andrew Reynolds

Mr Reynolds concluded the meeting with the MDA Board noting that Australia must eventually face up to the use of recycled water, noting growing water demands Mr Reynolds expressed that he could not see how Australia could go on without recycled water.

The Murray Darling Association is a membership-based peak representative organisation representing local government and communities across the Murray-Darling Basin. The purpose of the MDA is to provide effective representation of local government and communities at State and Federal level in the management of Basin resources.

To find out more about the Murray Darling Association, go to www.mda.asn.au or follow us on social media.



Image 1



Murray Darling Association Board meeting with the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Federal Minister for the Environment and Water, 28 FEB 2024

Image 2



Murray Darling Association Board meeting with the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Federal Minister for the Environment and Water, 28 FEB 2024



Image_3

Murray Darling Association Board Convened in Canberra, 28 FEB 2024, meeting with the Federal Minister for the Environment and Water, and the Shadow Minister for Water. Pictured (left to right) Mayor Craig Davies, CEO mark Lamb, Mayor Shane Sali.

Image_4



Murray Darling Association Board meeting with Senator Perin Davey, Shadow Minister for Water, 28 FEB 2024