



MDA Submission
2025 Basin Plan Evaluation
Riverina Regional Community Forum

Murray Darling Association Inc.
Contact: Mark Lamb
Chief Executive Officer



Contents

.....	1
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	3
Context	4
What has worked well?	5
Engagement and Dialogue	5
Efficiency Opportunities	5
What hasn't worked well?	6
Balance of the Triple Bottom Line	6
Did anything unexpected happen?	7
COVID-19	7
2022-2023 Flood Events	7
What/where/how could we do better?	8
Transparency and Cooperation	8
Water Efficiency Opportunities	8
Protection and Financing for Murray-Darling Basin Ramsar Wetlands	8
Quarterly SDLAM Project Progress Reporting	10
Addressing Riverbank Slumping/Undercutting	10
Review Levee Bank Management	11
Reduction of River Water Reliance for Non-Riparian Councils	12
Meeting Water Demands with less Water	12



Executive Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, and the Federal Minister for the Environment and Water, Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

We acknowledge that the planning of the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation is being guided by the Framework for the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation and the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation Roadmap.

The 2025 Evaluation Framework:

- provides transparency to the evaluation process.
- ensures the evaluation will meet the legislative requirements.
- inform the continued implementation and improvement of the Basin Plan.

The 2025 Evaluation Roadmap:

- describes the Authority's approach to the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation
- sets out the design elements, key timeframes, activities, and milestones, as well as roles and responsibilities of the Authority, Basin governments and other key stakeholders.

Following consultation with its members across the Murray-Darling Basin, the Murray Darling Association has provided recommendations and references to past submitted recommendations within this submission, addressing the key questions identified by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority:

- What hasn't worked well?
- What has worked well?
- Did anything unexpected happen?
- What/where/how could we do better?

Introduction

The [Murray Darling Association](#) is the peak body representing Local Government across the Murray-Darling Basin, with our membership base divided into 12 separate regions in which Councils have common interests.

- Regions 1, 2, 3, and 4 represent councils in Victoria and New South Wales,
- Regions 5, 6, 7, and 8 represent councils in South Australia,
- Regions 9, 10, and 11 represent councils in New South Wales,
- Region 12 represents councils in Queensland.

As the management, and the success of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, as well as the resources within the Murray-Darling Basin, is a matter of concern to our members, the Murray Darling Association has prepared the following submission relating to the 2025 Murray-Darling Basin Plan Evaluation.



Context

- The 2025 Basin Plan evaluation will:
 - Inform the 10-yearly review of the Basin Plan in 2026
 - Communicate the effectiveness, appropriateness and impacts of the Basin Plan to the intended audience.
 - Contribute to ongoing Basin Plan implementation by Basin government water management agencies.
- Peak Group Consultations to hear ideas on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan evaluation opened 5 December 2023
- Peak Group Consultations to hear ideas on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan evaluation close C.o.B. 18 December 2023.
- Submissions are to be submitted to engagement@mdba.gov.au with the subject line: *2025 Basin Plan Evaluation*.
- Further information on the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation can be found [here](#).



What has worked well?

Engagement and Dialogue

Community Engagement Sessions/Discussions/Dialogue:

Members of the Murray Darling Association have noted their appreciation for the availability and willingness for MDBA staff and Regional Officers to present at Quarterly Regional Meetings.

Ongoing Engagement sessions, discussions, and dialogue with communities, as has been seen in the past years, as well as ongoing, open and transparent engagement with representatives of Departments, Authorities, Agencies, and involved Third-party entities will only continue to benefit and inform communities.

Regional Offices/Officers:

Regional offices and MDBA Officers across the Murray-Darling Basin have offered a direct link to communities at select hubs for community engagement.

This has particularly been noted by Members of the Murray Darling Association with a more consistent availability of MDBA staff to present directly to its Members during quarterly Regional Meetings.

Some Members have noted difficulty in engaging with the MDBA through its regional offices, though the Murray Darling Association acknowledges that this may be due to staff availabilities.

Efficiency Opportunities

On, and Off Farm Water Efficiency:

Past efforts to initiate, and roll out on, and off farm water efficiency projects were received favourably by many Members of the Murray Darling Association.

Future implementation of further on, and off farm efficiency opportunities may assist in the Federal Government's transition goal of assisting Local Government Areas and their communities impacted by Water Buybacks and by water accessibility.



What hasn't worked well?

Balance of the Triple Bottom Line

The Maintenance of the Triple Bottom Line Approach, and Neutrality test to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan to ensure a balance of social, economic, and environmental concerns:

A reinstatement of the Triple Bottom Line Approach, as when it is applied to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, balances the needs of the present as well as the future.

That is, the Triple Bottom Line Approach considers all options for water savings projects and initiatives that will deliver positive outcomes and not compromise current and future social, economic, and environmental objectives.

Members of the Murray Darling Association have expressed their concerns that recent approaches to the goals of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan have set aside the Triple Bottom Line approach, favouring a greater focus on the environmental outcomes at the expense of social and economic impacts on the Murray-Darling Basin communities.

The Murray Darling Association acknowledges that during the recent Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) led Webinar on the Restoring our Rivers Bill indicated that:

- “socio-economic matters need to be considered”
- “Efficiency measures remain the same – this includes the socio-economic test”
 - “...existing socio-economic neutrality test continues to apply...”



Did anything unexpected happen?

COVID-19

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SDLAM projects and communities:

The full impact of the years lost to the global pandemic are still being quantified, and have likely contributed to delays and postponements of State, and Local Government infrastructure projects that would have benefitted the Basin and supported the goals of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

With the introduction, and passing, of the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023 additional time was given to, among other goals, completing State Based SDLAM projects.

2022-2023 Flood Events

Impact of the 2022-2023 Flood Events on SDLAM projects and communities:

The full impact of the Flood Events of 2022-2023 within the Murray-Darling Basin are still being quantified, and have likely contributed to delays, damage, and postponements of State, and Local Government infrastructure projects that would have benefitted the Basin and supported the goals of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

With the introduction, and passing, of the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023 additional time was given to, among other goals, completing State Based SDLAM projects.



What/where/how could we do better?

Transparency and Cooperation

Transparency and Cooperation:

Local councils, as elected representative of local communities and stewards of local social, economic, and environmental health and wellbeing, should be routinely included in dialogue and planning related to the implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan in their areas, including government dialogue with third parties, and that this engagement be timely, transparent, authentic, and meaningful.

This would benefit local communities, local economies and local environments as councils have a wide mandate to steward the triple bottom line, as opposed to some parties whose drivers can be narrow and often led by self-interest.

This has been raised in the Murray Darling Association's submission to the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023.

The Submission can be found via https://www.mda.asn.au/s/MDA_Submission-to-Water-Amendment-Bill-2023.pdf.

Water Efficiency Opportunities

Funding of opportunities for water efficiency using On-arm Efficiency Funds:

Use the funds available for On-Farm Efficiency programs for users who do not access River Murray directly (using a water licence) but use SA Water potable water derived from the River Murray. As these communities and properties do not own a water licence, they are not eligible for these funds as they do not hold a water licence to trade back to the MDBA.

This has been raised in the Murray Darling Association's submission to the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023.

The Submission can be found via https://www.mda.asn.au/s/MDA_Submission-to-Water-Amendment-Bill-2023.pdf.

Protection and Financing for Murray-Darling Basin Ramsar Wetlands

Funding of and Protection of Ramsar Wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin:

Continued funding for the implementation of the Healthy Coorong, Healthy Basin program and opportunities for increased protection and financing of all Ramsar Wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin.

This would continue to improve the health of all Ramsar wetlands, including the Coorong and capitalise on the increased flows over the last 12 months, including but not limited to improvements to the Southern Lagoon and the Murray Mouth.

Global wetlands account for a third of all carbon sequestered. Without the health of these systems, climate change will worsen and impact the Murray Darling Basin. It makes sense to prioritise all wetlands in the MDB so they can increase carbon storage and mitigate and adapt to climate change.



The SA Government completed a community engagement program in June 2023 on the draft Coorong Restoration Roadmap, which will guide how we implement a strategic restoration of the Coorong.

The Coorong is a wetland of international importance and one of the most significant waterbird habitats in the Murray-Darling system. Despite its significance, the Coorong is suffering a long-term decline, which the Millennium Drought exacerbated.

To aid the Coorong's return to a desired healthy state, the Healthy Coorong, Healthy Basin (HCHB) program was developed to improve the Coorong's ecology, knowledge and management and get the region back on track for a healthy future. HCHB is a \$77 million commitment to restore a healthy Coorong, announced by the Australian and South Australian governments in December 2018.

Since HCHB was announced in 2018, the program has completed the unprecedented Scientific Trials and Investigations (T&I) project, which identified knowledge gaps and has informed the development of targeted and effective management actions for the Coorong.

The Murray River, Lower Lakes and Coorong are central to the region's way of life, and it is known all too well from lived experience about the direct link between river health and people's economic, social, and cultural well-being.

The Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert Ramsar wetland is one of Australia's most important wetland areas. Australia designated the site, covering approximately 140,500 ha in South Australia, as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in 1985. Parts of the Coorong also form the Coorong National Park and Game Reserve.

The site is a unique mosaic of 23 wetland types and provides habitat for nationally threatened species such as the Murray Cod. It contains the threatened Gahnia sedge land ecosystem and part of the endangered Swamps of the Fleurieu Peninsula. The area is used for professional and recreational fishing, camping, boating, walking, wildlife observation and research. There are extensive Aboriginal, historical, and geological sites. The Ngarrindjeri people maintain a close association with the area, and some of the northern islands within the Coorong lagoon are reserved for their use. Most of the edges of Lakes Alexandrina and Albert are used for farming.

Before adopting the Basin Plan, the unsustainable use and management of Basin water resources (combined with severe drought) devastated our community and local environment. The impacts of the Millennium Drought on our region are well documented elsewhere but included low water levels, elevated salinity, vast exposure of acid sulphate soils and localised acidification of surface waters, a problem that continues to have long-standing environmental impacts on our environment, especially the Ramsar wetlands, has needed significant investment from State and Federal Governments to continue to work toward resolving. In addition, what lake water there was became inaccessible or unusable for irrigation, whilst low water levels significantly impacted related industries and tourism.

There is an opportunity to utilise wetlands as a climate change adaptation and mitigation strategy since global wetlands sequester one-third of global carbon. They act as a buffer for nutrient filtration and are also the key to the food web and ecology of the Murray-Darling Basin.



Quarterly SDLAM Project Progress Reporting

Report publicly on a quarterly basis progress to finalise and submit SDLAM projects to appropriate agencies for certification and implementation as per the deadline as determined by the Australian Government Minister for Water:

Commend the Basin Governments to report publicly on a quarterly basis progress to finalise and submit SDLAM projects to appropriate agencies for certification and implementation as per the deadline as determined by the Australian Government Minister for Water.

This has been raised in the Murray Darling Association's submission to the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023.

The Submission can be found via https://www.mda.asn.au/s/MDA_Submission-to-Water-Amendment-Bill-2023.pdf.

Addressing Riverbank Slumping/Undercutting

Quantifying the impact, management planning and amelioration fund to address riverbank slumping and riverbank undercutting in impacted regions:

Murray Darling Basin communities require a Government Agency to take responsibility for the issues of riverbank slumping (SA) and riverbank undercutting (Vic).

To ensure riverine Local Governments and land managers adjacent to Rivers impacted by riverbank slumping and riverbank undercutting receive adequate support to quantify the impact, access quality technical information to inform management actions and access an amelioration fund to implement these actions.

A predictive risk assessment tool to understand the likelihood of future riverbank failure in conjunction with developing a management process to work through the best practice assessment, monitoring, and management of these areas.

Numerous mapped areas along the Lower River Murray are vulnerable to Riverbank Slumping, with devastating consequences during and since the Millennium Drought. The recent floods and predicted high flows are expected to increase riverbank slumping and undercutting. This damage may only become more apparent when river levels drop. Riverbank slumping into rivers can occur with no warning.

Riverbank slumping and undercutting impact public and private land and public facilities, private infrastructure, farmland, businesses, riverine management, habitat, the environment, and water quality.

In the Lower Murray region of South Australia, the riverbank as we know it is not the natural bank. The banks of the river are only 100 years old and were created when the lock/weir/barrage system was constructed. As such, some banks are not benefiting from thousands of years of consolidation. Some slumping occurs on human-constructed levees used to reclaim flood plains. These levees are constructed with the right intentions; however, geotechnical testing and correct compaction techniques cannot be verified.

In this case, slumping is simply the natural environment trying to reach an equilibrium. In the Upper reaches of the River Murray tributaries (Campaspe, Loddon, Broken and Goulbourn Rivers), Inter Valley Water Transfers undercut the riverbanks, causing the bank to fall into the fast flowing water, damaging vegetation and habitat and unnaturally widening the Rivers.



Due to the recent events of the Millennium Drought and the 2022 – 2023 floods, riverbank slumping and undercutting are becoming increasingly common. The full impact and prevalence are not yet quantified.

Murray-Darling Basin communities require a Government Agency to take responsibility for the issues of riverbank slumping and undercutting to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach.

A risk management and predictive tool to understand the likelihood of future riverbank failure in conjunction with developing a management process to work through the best practice assessment, monitoring, and management of these areas.

From a long-term view, riverine communities require support, technical advice, and funding assistance to adequately prepare these vulnerable riverine zones for future flood and drought events to be resilient to future damage.

Review Levee Bank Management

Review levee bank management, and seek advice on what is proposed to implement regular assessment, maintenance, and enhancement of the levee bank system:

A review would ensure Government and Private Levees that protect towns and manage agricultural land for irrigation are assessed periodically, whether this be undertaken annually, biannually, or longer periods.

The 2022/2023 floods highlighted the need for all private and government levees to be assessed as fit for purpose to prevent breaches, as occurred to numerous levees along the Lower Murray.

Private levees along the River Murray were not fit for purpose as flood barriers and suffered breaches during the recent floods due to a lack of assessment and maintenance. During the Millennium drought, many levees lost their integrity. They may have yet to be repaired since then, so they are very susceptible to failure during the high flows and extra water pressure.

As of July 2023, all storages were full, and SA was under a High Flow Advice (>40 GI/day). Whilst flows were lower than before the recent floods, the high river was caused by one significant event in November that simultaneously flooded several Victorian Rivers.

Failure of the levees caused unnecessary flooding of land that took many months to dry out and then repair the levees for the future.

Private and public levees should be maintained to an acceptable standard when no risk exists.



Reduction of River Water Reliance for Non-Riparian Councils

Releasing of funds to non-riparian Local Governments for engineering solutions to reduce reliance on the Murray-Darling Basin.

The releasing of funds quarantined for River Murray Licence holders for any user of River Murray water to improve Local Government's ability to reduce reliance on piped, potable, and River Murray water for township use, such as watering reserves and parks and managing stormwater to expand vegetation and biodiversity through Water Sensitive Urban Design and Stormwater capture and reuse schemes.

The Off-Farm Efficiency Program is closed, with large amounts of untapped money available, with very few funded projects in operation and many mega-litres of water savings to be exploited.

Only Local Governments with a water licence can access the Off-Farm Efficiency Program funds to improve water efficiency and reduce their reliance on the River Murray. However, many users who use River Murray water through the SA Water supply (and similar elsewhere) could also use these funds and reduce the draw on the Murray Darling Basin.

Regional Councils are in an excellent position to improve the quality and quantity of water in the River and their environment. However, they need more resources and knowledge to implement the best options. Both are in much greater abundance in the City Councils.

This has been raised in the Murray Darling Association's submission to the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023.

The Submission can be found via https://www.mda.asn.au/s/MDA_Submission-to-Water-Amendment-Bill-2023.pdf.

Meeting Water Demands with less Water

That the Murray Darling Basin Plan 2.0 to address meeting water demands with less water:

Consolidate and reinforce previous motions, and seek support from other SA entities, via Regional Development Australia, Murraylands and Riverland LGA, and Southern & Hills LGA, including the reinforcement of the importance of climate change in the review of the basin plan.

To understand the likely Murray-Darling Basin flows into the future and how they could be allocated if the same low flows (over the last 20 years) are maintained. Water flows into the River Murray over the past 20 years are nearly half their 20th-century average of 9407 GL per year, down to an average of just 4820 GL per year. In a changing climate, communities throughout the Basin will need continued assistance to adjust to a future with less water.

This has been raised in the Murray Darling Association's submission to the Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Bill 2023.

The Submission can be found via https://www.mda.asn.au/s/MDA_Submission-to-Water-Amendment-Bill-2023.pdf.

