

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority met in Melbourne on 12 March 2019 to press ahead with its work program to support implementation of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan. The Authority members urged all jurisdictions to do more to communicate progress achieved to date with the Basin Plan to their communities. The current outlook for continued drier and hotter conditions underlined the need to ensure the community has up-to-date information about the role and importance of implementation of the Basin Plan and its operation.

The Authority acknowledged the hardship experienced by communities throughout the Basin that are currently coping with little or no river water. With the Murray–Darling Basin experiencing its driest two-year period since 1902 and the Bureau of Meteorology’s dry outlook for water resources means that the pressure on people across the Basin and its fragile riverine environment is likely to continue. In a briefing from the MDBA’s head of River Management, Andrew Reynolds, Authority members were reassured that water conservation was the priority for water managers across the Murray system and all Basin jurisdictions were tasked with managing the finite resource with care.

The Authority commended the work of CEO, Phillip Glyde, and all staff of the Authority for their sustained efforts in progressing the Plan’s implementation, and at the same time responding to heightened community concern and public debate about the Plan and drought conditions in the Basin. They recognised the increased demands this has placed on staff and acknowledged the critical role they are playing.

The Authority was briefed on the challenges of operating the river to meet requirements to supply water to all water users including communities, agricultural businesses and the environment. Stakeholder concerns and the need to communicate issues associated with river operations effectively was emphasised. A report on the management and accounting of **system losses** in water delivery was considered and will be published in the coming weeks.

Members were briefed in detail on actions by the MDBA and others to address **fish deaths** in the rivers of the Murray–Darling Basin, in particular in the area of the Lower Darling where three major events occurred over summer. The Authority commended the effective cooperation between the Commonwealth, state and local agencies to mitigate further fish deaths in the Basin through a range of actions including targeted water quality monitoring, use of satellite imagery to locate water hole habitats, intelligence sharing with on-site stakeholders and funding aerators in the Lower Darling.

Professor Rob Vertessy reported to Authority members on the Independent Assessment of the 2018-19 fish deaths in the Lower Darling, which is due to present its final report to the Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources at the end of March. He outlined the causes behind the Lower Darling fish deaths and discussed measures to reduce the likelihood of future events. The Authority was briefed on the broad-based expert review workshop held in Melbourne on 27 February. The interim findings were shared and tested by about 40 experts and gaps in analysis were identified. Professor Vertessy also outlined the panel’s plans to travel to Menindee after 31 March to discuss the findings and recommendations with the community.

As chair of the MDBA’s independent **Advisory Committee on Social, Economic and Environmental Sciences**, Professor Vertessy also briefed Authority members on the committee’s work program to

help guide the MDBA's next phase of work on climate change as well as monitoring and evaluation. Professor Vertessy underlined the continued need for active engagement of the MDBA with diverse members of the scientific community, from a range of research institutions, to ensure robust and evidence-based implementation of the Basin Plan.

The Authority noted the publication of the MDBA's **climate change discussion paper** in February as an important step to deepen engagement with the climate science community and lead agencies to progress the MDBA's work in this area. The discussion paper will be a platform to advance the Basin Plan's accommodation of a changing climate in the lead-up to the major 2026 Basin Plan review.

The extended outreach by the MDBA to Basin communities was discussed as part of the report of Basin Community Consultative Committee. The Authority welcomed the [Committee's recent communication](#) in relation to the importance of ongoing implementation of the Basin Plan. The Authority also received advice following the recent visit by the Chief Executive, Phillip Glyde, to Broken Hill and the Lower Darling area. The recruitment of a **regional engagement officer for the Lower Darling**, focused on the Menindee area, will increase connections with this part of the Basin. Members stressed the critical importance of regular and accurate **information being readily available to the public**, about river operations and the Basin Plan, as well as opportunities for people across the Basin to engage with the MDBA on matters of local importance.

The Authority was pleased to meet with the Victorian Deputy Secretary Water and Catchments at the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Helen Vaughan, and discussed the importance of, and challenges associated with, current conditions in the Basin and with the continued implementation of the Basin Plan reforms including the completion of Victoria's water resource plans.

Authority members noted the schedule of state governments to submit **water resource plans** for consideration by the Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources for accreditation, once assessed as being compliant with Basin Plan requirements by the MDBA. Proposed water resource plans for Wimmera Mallee groundwater (Vic), Wimmera Mallee surface water (Vic), the Condamine Balonne (Qld), Queensland Border Rivers-Moonie (Qld), Eastern Mount Lofty Ranges (SA) and River Murray (SA) are currently with the MDBA for assessment, and several Victorian and ACT plans are expected in the coming weeks.

The Authority noted that **all states had requested an extension** from the Minister to extend the deadline to submit water resource plans to the MDBA. The Authority urged states to use any extension of time to ensure the plans submitted were robust. They highlighted the importance of appropriate community consultations, including with Aboriginal traditional owners. The Authority has the expectation that effective measures for ongoing community and Aboriginal involvement will be in place. The Authority also urged states to ensure details of the mechanisms they would use to regulate and account for all forms of water diversions, including floodplain harvesting, were clear and robust, and highlighted the need for environmental water to be adequately protected in all state plans. The Authority highlighted that even with the extension, without sustained effort, the finalisation of the plans this year remains a key risk.

The importance of toolkit commitments being addressed by state governments was reinforced by the Authority in order for northern Basin water resource plans to be assessed as suitable for accreditation by the Minister. The NSW Government entered a formal agreement concerning progressing toolkit measures, before its caretaker period. The measures outlined the effective protection of environmental water and also included works and measures to facilitate fish movement and improve habitat as well as the removal of constraints to water flowing into wetlands. These and other commitments – once implemented through water resource plans – will ensure environmental water holdings in the northern basin are translated into real benefits to the rivers' long-term ecological health.

Authority members emphasised the significance of the 30 June 2019 milestone when all governments have agreed that new **limits to the diversion of water** from the Basin's rivers and ground water resources will come into effect. These arrangements will be formalised through the accreditation of water resource plans.

Variations to the shared reductions of water to be recovered for the environment at a catchment level were presented to Authority members for consideration, and agreed to on the basis that it met the requirements of Basin Plan s6.05.

An update was provided to the Authority on MDBA commitments to boost compliance in the Basin by chair of the Authority's independent Compliance and Assurance Committee, Alan Holmes. The Authority noted progress in implementing the Basin Plan Compliance Compact and were concerned with some of the findings of the **Water Trade Price Reporting Audit** report which will be released in the coming weeks. The Authority reinforced the importance of accurate trade price reporting for an effective market, and the importance of good administrative systems to support this. The Authority also stressed the importance of the robust and thorough work underway to build the MDBA's capacity to enforce compliance with the Basin Plan.

The final draft report of the **Review of Joint Governments Governance Arrangements** by Mr Greg Claydon, as appointed by the Basin Officials Committee (BOC) on 20 September 2018, was noted by the Authority. The review is intended to inform the improved stewardship of the Basin Plan by all government through streamlined decision making, clarity of roles and responsibilities of various committees, improved efficiency and cost effectiveness of joint governance arrangements and increased transparency and community confidence. Basin governments will provide a response to recommendations for consideration at the next Ministerial Council meeting in June 2019.

The method of reviewing the **Basin-wide environmental watering strategy**, which is a requirement of the Basin Plan in 2020, was considered by the Authority. The review is an essential check on the environmental framework to ensure that the targets are fit for purpose.

The Authority discussed the announcement by the Australian Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources, David Littleproud, of the Government's decision to **decentralise about a third of the MDBA**. The authority noted this was an extension of the regional office network the organisation, that has seen 10 per cent of staff located in regional centres to date. The Authority reinforced the importance of consulting with staff on the next step in regionalising the organisation while ensuring an appropriate disposition of staff across the more dispersed network of offices to support the MDBA's continued effectiveness. Authority members asked for regular updates on progress in delivering further regionalisation. The Authority also stressed the importance of continuing the MDBA's work to implement the Basin Plan and manage the River Murray and welcomed the new funding that would allow for a methodical approach to developing an implementation workplan for regionalisation.

The next meeting of the Authority is scheduled for 2 April 2019 in Dubbo.

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