



Basin Community Committee

Bringing a community perspective to the Murray–Darling Basin

BASIN COMMUNITY COMMITTEE COMMUNIQUE

7 November 2024

The Basin Community Committee (the Committee) met on 9 and 10 October 2024 in Mildura on the lands of the Latji Latji and Barkindji peoples.

During this meeting, the Committee was grateful for the opportunity to meet with and provide its advice to members of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (the MDBA).

This meeting began with a welcome to Country and smoking ceremony led by local Elder Aunty Janine Wilson, Traditional Owner and River Ranger Samantha Lawson and Committee member and Acting Chief Executive of the First People of Millewa Mallee Aboriginal Corporation Michael Gilby.

Throughout the meeting, the Committee discussed and formulated advice regarding four key focus areas.

A summary of this advice can be found in the attached Statement of Advice.

The first focus area was current Basin Plan implementation. The Committee received two updates, the first from the MDBA regarding the development of the Constraints Relaxation Implementation Roadmap, and the second from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (the Department) on the progress of measures under *Restoring our Rivers: Basin Plan Implementation*. This included the Resilient Rivers Water Infrastructure Program, the 450 GL Voluntary Water Purchase Program and the Sustainable Communities Program.

The Committee then received a presentation from the Department on the renewal of the National Water Initiative and updates on the progress of the Basin Plan Review, including on feedback from the Regional Community Forums and Peak Roundtables for the Basin Plan Evaluation (looking back), and an update on Basin Plan Review (looking forward) progress. Scott Ashby, acting Chief Executive, also provided the Committee with an update on recent activities of the MDBA's science developments.

The Committee will next meet online on 20 November 2024.

BACKGROUND

Members of the Committee are appointed by the 7-member Murray–Darling Basin Authority after an extensive selection process involving all Basin governments. They reflect the diverse perspectives of towns and communities across the Basin, as well as the diversity of experiences around water reform.

Contact your local Basin Community Committee member via engagement@mdba.gov.au to share your views on how the Basin Plan is being implemented.

See a full list of members and map of their locations at www.mdba.gov.au/BCC

The Basin Community Committee is an independent advisory committee to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority and the Murray–Darling Basin Ministerial Council. Established under the *Water Act 2007*, the Committee ensures the voices of diverse communities in the Basin are heard.

For more information on the Basin Community Committee

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BASIN COMMUNITY COMMITTEE - STATEMENT OF ADVICE

7 November 2024

In addition to the previous advice provided by Basin Community Committee (the Committee) in our [July 2024 Communiqué and Statement of Advice](#), the Committee wishes to provide the following advice:

1. Basin community overwhelm

Many Committee members, in their opening remarks, noted that community members are increasingly feeling overwhelmed due to the significant volume of water related programs being undertaken locally. Consequently, communities feel they are not able to participate in these programs and related consultation to the extent they would like, nor adapt to resulting changes in a beneficial manner.

The Committee encourages respective governments to consider how they can implement a more coordinated approach to Basin water management and reform that optimises opportunities for community input. The Committee also urges governments to carefully consider which programs to push ahead with currently, and which programs can wait until a less overwhelming time.

2. National Water Agreement (NWA)

The Committee agreed the National Water Initiative (NWI) has been the most significant national water governance document for the past two decades and has laid the foundation for improved water management and policy development in the Murray-Darling Basin.

The Committee supports the development of an updated NWA that builds on the foundation laid by the NWI and includes an increased emphasis on First Nations' cultural water rights and uses, preparing and managing for climate change, and integrated catchment management – as recommended by the Productivity Commission in its most recent statutory reviews of the NWI.

However, members caution against the endorsement of the current drafting of the proposed NWA.

In particular, the BCC outlines the following advice about both the process for developing and drafting the NWA:

- a. Considering the significance of this document, and the need for ongoing community support for its future implementation, it is critical that community members are provided the opportunity to genuinely participate in and contribute to the development of the NWA (not just via a submission process). The BCC's view is that currently many community members do not feel they have been provided this opportunity.
- b. The inclusion of over 300 principles is overly ambitious and does not provide clarity about the focus and intended direction of the redeveloped Agreement. The Committee believes the

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NWA should build on, not seek to rewrite, the NWI. The Committee also feels the inclusion of a large number of principles will be a major obstacle to the future implementation of the NWA. The NWA should focus on fewer principles that will have the greatest impact.

- c. The drafting of many of the proposed principles is unclear and subject to interpretation. Members are concerned this lack of clarity will create unnecessary division in the community, impeding progress. In particular, the Committee is concerned that some of the current drafting could result in potentially significant and unintended consequences, including impacts to the integrity of existing water entitlement and the current water management frameworks – both key outcomes and achievements under the previous NWI.

We encourage government decision makers, including the Murray–Darling Basin Authority, to take an active interest in the development of this document, and to take the time necessary to genuinely work in partnership with communities to develop an NWA that both builds on the previous NWI and has broad support from water stakeholders and communities respectively.

3. Basin Plan implementation

In our [July 2024 Communique and Statement of Advice](#), the Committee provided clear advice about Basin Plan implementation, including the Sustainable Communities Program, the Sustainable Limit Diversion Adjustment Mechanism Program and the 450 GL Voluntary Water Purchase Program.

In addition, at this October meeting, the Committee provide the following further advice:

- a. Regarding the development of the Constraints Relaxation Implementation Roadmap, the Committee advised that obtaining social license is important for this work to progress, and there is community concern regarding future planned flow events. Much of this community concern stems from flow targets canvassed early in the consultative process and attention should be given to a narrative that reflects current understandings of the Murray Darling system. While these projects are important for improving environmental outcomes, members would like to see a more pragmatic approach taken by Basin States to addressing community concerns. The recent consultation in the Murrumbidgee was highlighted as a disappointing example whereby the Government was not perceived to have worked in partnership with communities.
- b. With respect to water purchase, the Committee re-emphasised previous advice about the level of anxiety in communities about water recovery and urged the Department to consider a more strategic approach to future water recovery programs. In addition, the Committee highlighted the proposed rule-changes in relation to the Northern Basin and community concern this could result in a compulsory and uncompensated reduction to the reliability of existing water entitlements.

4. Basin Plan Review

The Committee provided comment that the *Basin Plan Review Early Insights Paper* was well-written, seemed to reflect communities' views at a high level, and was a good introduction to the Basin Plan review process. Members also endorsed the next steps proposed for the Basin Plan Review, however

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encouraged the MDBA to be mindful of the significant number of Basin water related consultation programs communities are facing at the moment.

5. Basin science

The Committee appreciated the science-based presentation from Scott Ashby, acting Chief Executive, and welcomed news of a science summit next year. The Committee noted there was little ‘ground truthing’ and community consultation undertaken when the previous Basin Plan modelling and assumptions were developed, and that it is critical this occurs with future modelling – in other words, ‘black box’s’ should be avoided to ensure community confidence in the science. The Committee also encouraged the MDBA to be transparent about the existing knowledge gaps and assumptions that may change with time.

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