

Looking Back to Move Forward Report: Summary Table for workshop participants

Project background

The *Looking back to move forward* report evidences the years of advocacy and work undertaken by Basin First Nations, who continue to fight for their water rights. Together, First Nations peoples have changed the conversation and the legislative and policy landscape. Despite this advocacy work, it is acknowledged that resulting outcomes have been deemed inadequate in many cases, and that change has been slow.

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) has begun preparing for the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation and 2026 Basin Plan Review. Every five years, the Basin Plan must be evaluated to look back at how the Plan is working. The next Basin Plan evaluation is happening in 2025. The evaluation and other work will then inform a forward-looking review of the Basin Plan, which will happen in 2026.

In order to begin preparing for this, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority commissioned First Nations social change consultancy Cox Inall Ridgeway to undertake a literature review (the *Looking back to move forward* report) to identify First Nations water policy goals since 2012 in the Basin and to look at how the Basin Plan 2012 (Cth) has contributed towards progressing these goals.

How Cox Inall Ridgeway developed the report

To develop the *Looking back to move forward* report, the team at Cox Inall Ridgeway reviewed over 40 documents. These included reports, submissions and scientific papers from the Government, First Nations organisations and non-Government organisations.

Any First Nations people or organisations who were referred to or quoted in the document remain owners of their views and of their Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP). Cox Inall Ridgeway has made every attempt to make sure that their views are represented accurately and in context. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority has sought permission by authors to reuse published material when required, adhering to their draft ICIP policy. In the full report, some information is redacted where permission to reuse material is still being sought.

The *Looking back to move forward* report was in draft form, until workshops could be undertaken with Basin First Nations peoples.

In August and September 2024, First Nations peoples and communities were invited to participate in a series of face-to-face workshops as part of the testing phase. Four face-to-face workshops were held between August-September 2024 in key locations across the Basin in Berri, Toowoomba, Wodonga and Dubbo. Additionally, one workshop was held virtually. The number of participants across these workshops totalled 102.

This summary report includes the learnings and findings from the workshops and how this shaped the final report and progress ratings.

How Cox Inall Ridgeway rated progress

Cox Inall Ridgeway originally provided **draft** progress ratings against each theme. Progress was rated based on the research, reports and other sources reviewed for the literature review, as well as information provided by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority about the Basin Plan. In a number of areas, the goals in the theme were not found to be within the scope of what the Basin Plan was designed to do. In these cases, we have not assessed progress towards these goals. In rating progress, we acknowledge that there may be other relevant information that was not available to us at the time.

Draft progress ratings are divided into the following categories:

- **Substantial progress made**
- **Some progress made**
- **Limited progress made**
- **No progress made**
- **Not rated, as the goals in this theme were not in scope of the Basin Plan.**

After the workshops, CIR finalised the report based on what was heard, through the addition of a “What we heard” section as part of each theme and revised progress ratings. The table below summarises the original versus final progress ratings by CIR, and the key points from the report’s literature and consultations for each theme.

This document is only a summary, see the full report for the details on each theme.



Final Looking Back to Move Forward Summary Table

This table tries to capture the key points raised in the FINAL *Looking back to move forward* report, with the column on the left hand side summarising findings from the literature review and the column on the right hand side (highlighted in yellow) summarising content from the workshops that builds on the report content. Each of the report's 11 themes summarises the goals and issues that have been voiced by First Nations people over the last 10 or more years on water management in the Basin, supported by the learnings and findings in the 2024 looking back to move forward workshops with Basin First Nations peoples. For more detail on each of the goals, where the goals came from and progress ratings please read the full *Looking back to move forward* report.

Theme Descriptions	Key points from the Looking back to move forward report about the goals/aspirations of First Nations and their people	Draft Progress Rating	Key points from the Looking back to move forward workshop participants	Updated Progress Rating
Legislation This theme covers goals relating to international law, as well as how First Nations rights and interests are thought about or recognised in the Basin water management.	First Nations people have been calling for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater adoption of international conventions and agreements such as the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the Biodiversity Convention. Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Better protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage. Cultural flows to be secured in the Basin Plan. A higher benchmark for recognising First Nations rights and interests and engaging First Nations in water management. 	Limited progress made	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More recognition of Basin First Nations' rights, including UNDRIP Increase Basin literacy of relevant legislation. Legislation needs to address accountability and compliance. Decision-making and governance structures need to be transparent and inclusive of Basin First Nations. Institutional racism inhibits progress for Basin First Nations to access land and water. At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, the evidence received from workshop participants confirmed CIR's initial rating of ' <i>Limited progress</i> '.	Limited progress made
Sovereignty, ownership and self-determination This theme explores issues and goals related to the unceded sovereignty of First Nations' lands and waters.	First Nations people have been calling for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition that sovereignty was never ceded over lands and waters in the Basin. Recognition of the ongoing impact of colonialism and dispossession on First Nations' rights and governance, including in relation to water. Self-determination and ownership over spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic matters relevant to them, including water management. Sovereignty over data and protection of Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP). 	Not rated, as the goals in this theme were not in scope of the Basin Plan	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failure to recognise the sovereignty of First Nations peoples' is a foundational issue. First Nations peoples want to be decision-makers, not just consulted. Sovereignty, ownership and self-determination can't be realised without actual outcomes on the ground. Evidence received from workshop participants was in favour of this theme being included in the scope of the Basin Plan going forwards. It was argued that the existence of the Basin Plan and Chapter 10, Part 14 impacts the sovereignty of Basin First Nations peoples and therefore brings it within scope.	Not rated
Engagement and Representation This theme discusses the need for improving consultation and engagement in Basin water management processes.	First Nations people have been calling for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved engagement and representation with First Nations, including control and decision-making, influence over and participation in all aspects of water management. Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) Better Basin Plan engagement processes for preparing and implementing water resource plans to address issues such as consultation fatigue and overly technical language. Transformational change on an institution level, including employing more First Nations people as water practitioners and in positions of leadership across all levels of bureaucracy. Resourcing for capacity-building and partnerships with First Nations organisations. 	Some progress made	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of meaningful engagements in the past and the importance of respect, mutual trust, accountability and commitment going forwards. Important to have the right people represented at engagement, and of having culturally authoritative governance institutions. Government engagement has been siloed, with a range of requirements. Evidence received from workshop participants regarding CIR's rating of ' <i>Some progress</i> ' was mixed, with some views reflecting support for the rating and others commenting that more needs to be done. In view of the feedback, CIR has left the rating unchanged.	Some progress made

Water market This theme discusses the need to ensure Basin First Nations people can participate in the water market.	First Nations people have been calling for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full participation in the water market. • Ownership and management of water, including through access to water entitlements and cultural flows. • Conditions of water licences allocated for cultural purposes to be reviewed to allow for any use, including economic activities and outcomes. • Access to water entitlements for any purpose, which support the cultural, social and economic wellbeing of Basin First Nations. • Better recognition of water rights under native title systems. 	Not rated, as the goals in this theme were not in scope of the Basin Plan	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is frustration over ‘aqua nullius’ still in existence. • No equality in the water market currently. • First Nations peoples also need access to land and infrastructure to hold and transport water. • Expense and complexity are barriers to the water market. • “Ownership” of water is a concept at odds with Aboriginal concepts of water and Country. Evidence received from workshop participants was in favour of this theme being included in the scope of the Basin Plan going forwards. It was argued that the existence of the Basin Plan and Chapter 10, Part 14 impacts the ability of Basin First Nations to access the water market and therefore brings it within scope.	Not rated
Cultural flows This theme discusses the need to ensure First Nations water allocations are embedded in water management.	First Nations people have been calling for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural flows/allocations to be owned and managed by Basin First Nations peoples to support the spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic goals for Country and people. • Cultural flows that support First Nations’ custodial rights to care for Country and water, and preserve and protect cultural heritage such as burial mounds, scarred trees and campsites. • Recognition of the strong link between cultural flows and social and emotional wellbeing for First Nations communities. • Addressing barriers to cultural flows including overallocation, governance and establishing benchmarks with First Nations people. 	Some progress made	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustration at the lack of progress of implementing cultural flows, given the decades of advocacy and work on this issue. • Frustration at having to apply through western regulatory systems. • Desire for more upskilling on cultural flows. Evidence received from workshop participants supported the progress rating being downgraded to ‘ <i>Limited progress</i> ’. This highlights the strong sentiment heard through the workshops that First Nations communities want evidence of tangible outcomes on the ground.	Limited progress made
Water for the environment This theme discusses the need to improve the health of key environmental sites.	First Nations people have been calling for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water to be given back to Country because there are concerns that there have been losses to natural flows and too much water taken off Country. • The Basin Plan to support meaningful outcomes for Country and community through environmental watering. • Better balance between environmental, social and economic outcomes – there is belief that overuse is causing harm to the environment. • Better water quality and flow of water, to keep the waterways alive and healthy. • Better ways to incorporate First Nations’ Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into the management of water. • Increasing the quality and rate of participation by First Nations in environmental water management through increased partnerships, co-design and co-management to deliver both environmental and cultural outcomes. • Continuing the trend towards better inclusion of First Nations people in environmental water delivery projects. 	Substantial progress made	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grief over the state of waterways and Country from overallocation, changing of flows and development. • First Nations want to be more involved in the implementation of environmental flows and have detailed traditional knowledge that can lead to better environmental and cultural outcomes. • Badly managed environmental flows are destroying cultural heritage and impacting on species. • Strong ICIP protocols are important. Evidence received from workshop participants supported the progress rating being downgraded to “ <i>Some progress</i> .” The downgrading of this rating reflects that lived experience of outcomes on the ground by Basin First Nations is extremely varied due to the ad hoc nature of environmental flows partnerships and initiatives, and that progress has not been experienced across the board by Basin First Nations. It also reflects the urgency for meaningful action to heal Country in partnership with First Nations which was heard at the workshops.	Some progress made
Natural resource management	First Nations people have been calling for:	Not rated, as the goals in this theme	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing:	Not rated

<p>This theme discusses the need to integrate Basin First Nations knowledge to manage natural resources.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to be incorporated into water management. This requires improving accessibility of language around water management for First Nations and non-Indigenous people. The need to improve understandings of First Nations values and worldviews, including recognising multiple worldviews on water. More partnerships, co-design and co-management to achieve cultural and environmental outcomes while providing economic development opportunities. More resources to build the capacity and skills of both First Nations and non-Indigenous organisations, so they can communicate and partner better together. 	<p>were not in scope of the Basin Plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a potential synergy between water management science and TEK, which will improve waterways. However, there are concerns about ICIP and data sovereignty for TEK. There is a power disparity between government and Basin First Nations, which is a key barrier to engagement. There is a lot of interest in potential opportunities for economic development while addressing natural resource management issues in a holistic way. <p>Evidence received from workshop participants was in favour of this theme being included in the scope of the Basin Plan going forwards. It was argued that the existence of the Basin Plan and Chapter 10, Part 14 impacts the ability of Basin First Nations to manage lands and water across the Basin and therefore brings it within scope.</p>	
<p>Water quality This theme discusses the need to ensure the basin water quality is monitored and maintained.</p>	<p>First Nations people have been calling for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water quality that supports Country and community. First Nations are concerned with the impact introduced species, chemicals and other pollutants are having on Basin water quality in rivers, creeks and wetlands. Mandatory and regular reporting of water quality. Improved water security for Basin towns and cities, including water for critical human needs. <p>First Nations people are also concerned with the way government responses can feel like ‘emergency’ responses and governments are not considering the distress this causes among Basin First Nations communities. Especially as First Nations peoples have already shared their views and concerns, but these have not been implemented well.</p>	<p>No Progress Made</p>	<p>At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The health of water is at the heart of Basin First Nations’ aspirations for healthy Country and people. Many First Nations peoples can no longer swim or fish in local waterways as they used to because of toxicity. Poor water health disproportionately affects Basin First Nations people. There is a real concern with the water quality, given the use of pesticides and other chemicals by farmers and in the mining industry. There is real concern with health of fish, reduction and/or loss of native fish in the waterways. There is frustration over the lack of accountability and compliance with reporting water quality. There are calls to expand water quality testing parameters and require independent testing and reporting, ideally involving First Nations peoples. <p>Evidence received from workshop participants confirmed CIR’s initial rating of “No Progress,” so this rating has remained unchanged.</p>	<p>No Progress Made</p>
<p>River access, traditional practices and wellbeing This theme discusses the need to ensure Basin First Nations peoples have access to rivers for traditional practices and to support overall wellbeing.</p>	<p>First Nations people are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concerned about the ongoing impact of colonial systems on Basin First Nations water rights and the link with the social, cultural and emotional wellbeing of communities. Concerned over impacts on fulfilling cultural obligations on Country. This includes accessing creation sites, cultural sites and gathering food, medicine, plants and materials. Still unable to physically access many places on Country, such as riverbanks and creeks. Urgently needing cultural heritage safeguards to be part of water policy to prevent harm to sites. Needing funding to undertake detailed mapping of cultural sites and activities to link to cultural flow plans. 	<p>Limited progress made</p>	<p>At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most common concerns related to Basin First Nations inability to access rivers and waterways on Country, being able to practice their culture and support their wellbeing. There are poor/non-existent relationships with landowners that makes it difficult access Country. Many sites of cultural significance/heritage near the waterways require more protections, recording and registering, as they are vulnerable to flooding. Calls for MDBA to facilitate relationship building with States to assist with access issues. 	<p>Limited progress made</p>

			Evidence received from workshop participants confirmed CIR's initial rating of 'Limited progress', so this rating has remained unchanged.	
Economic This theme discusses the need to ensure Basin First Nations have opportunities to participate in the economy.	First Nations people have been calling for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of their economic interests in water. • The right to self-determine decisions over water on Country. • Water entitlements that can be used for any purpose, which could lead to more economic development opportunities from businesses on Country including agriculture, fishing, aquaculture and tourism. • An enduring funding model to mitigate barriers in First Nations communities to access water markets. 	<i>For progress to date on this theme – please refer to progress outlines in the Themes: Water Market, Cultural Flows, and Water for the Environment.</i>	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economic base for Basin First Nations peoples has been degraded by over-grazing and over-allocation of water since colonisation. • There is frustration of the lack of Basin First Nations water rights and 'aqua nullius'. • Economic aspirations include jobs and opportunities to support the next generation. • A lot of interest in potential economic development opportunities such as cultural tourism, fish stocking, bush food enterprises and breeding programs, which depend on cultural flows and healthy Country. • There needs to be more funding and resources to support Basin First Nations develop these industries, including training for business plans and grant applications. 	<i>For progress to date on this theme – please refer to progress outlines in the Themes: Water Market, Cultural Flows, and Water for the Environment.</i>
Climate change This theme discusses the need to ensure the Basin and its resources are protected through climate change, and recognises the impact of climate change on First Nations	First Nations people are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observing climates changes in the seasons, waterways, plants and animals that disproportionately effect First Nations peoples and communities. • Calling for new objectives and targets for the Basin with the consideration of climate change that are developed in partnership with First Nations communities. • On the forefront of local and regional climate change responses with conservation and land management initiatives. 	Not rated, as the Basin Plan is currently not required to establish First Nations objectives and targets for Climate Change.	At the 2024 workshops with Basin First Nations, participants built on the content in the draft report, discussing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impacts of climate change are felt by Basin First Nations disproportionately, with loss of important cultural plants and animals. • The Basin Plan's targets for climate change must be developed with Basin First Nations through a co-design process. • It is important to be proactive and consider holistic approaches to addressing climate change. • First Nations' capacity to engage is interlinked with other key issues including access, water allocations and cultural flows. Evidence received from workshop participants was in favour of climate change and its impact on First Nations being included in the scope of the Basin Plan going forwards.	Not rated