

Governing Panel Response to the MD–WERP Mid-Term Evaluation

March 2024

Introduction

The Murray–Darling Water and Environment Research Program (MD–WERP) is a 5-year, up to \$20 million Australian Government initiative aimed at strengthening scientific knowledge of the Murray–Darling Basin and improve:

- water policy, with respect to achieving Basin Plan objectives
- capacity to manage risks with respect to water availability and water use
- river operations and water management outcomes.

The MD–WERP has five strategic objectives being delivered through strategic research, tactical investment and synthesis activities:

1. maximise value to water reform and management from investment
2. leverage co-investment with research providers and key stakeholders
3. facilitate adoption of research by advancing cooperation between users and researchers
4. invest in applied research that delivers better informed environmental water management decisions by Commonwealth agencies and improved outcomes for communities
5. be a platform from which to launch a more enduring research program.

The strategic research themes were developed by researchers in collaboration with Murray–Darling Basin end users with the aim of encouraging engagement and cooperation to deliver the best possible outcomes for the Basin and to ensure the adoption of the Program’s research. Strategic research projects funded through the Program are being undertaken by research consortia led by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and La Trobe University.

Monitoring, evaluation, reporting, improvement

The MD–WERP Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) Plan sets out the roles, responsibilities and guides the approach to the monitoring, evaluation, and reporting to inform continuous improvement of the Program. The Program is to deliver two evaluations:

- a health check on the effectiveness of the program to date (2023 mid-term evaluation)
- a full and final program evaluation at the end of the program term (2025 end of term evaluation).

The MERI Plan states the mid-term evaluation was to provide an assessment of the Program’s achievements against the Key Evaluation Questions relating to the effectiveness of the program with the outcomes being used to inform program improvement and to demonstrate program successes. The approach, including who and how the evaluation would be conducted, was to be confirmed by mid-2022 and endorsed by the Governing Panel.

Mid-term evaluation

The Mid-Term Evaluation of the Murray–Darling Water and Environmental Research Program was conducted by independent evaluators Professor Barry Hart and Dr Rhonda Butcher from July to November 2023. The Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE) is constructive and formative in nature where possible with the intent in assisting improvements to the Program processes where appropriate.

The MTE found that the MD–WERP is of significant value and merit. Overall, the Program was effectively planned, is being effectively implemented and has a generally robust governance and program and project management systems in place. Progress with the implementation of the strategic research projects is generally on schedule, although there is a lack of clarity about how the research outputs will be synthesised and packaged into forms that can be used by the main end users.

The MTE sought to answer a number of key evaluation question set by the MD–WERP Governing Panel using the following program level process indicators:

- governance processes
- program design and planning (co-design activities)
- program implementation (collaboration, project management, communications and engagement)
- outputs and outcomes (progress, likely outcomes/impacts).

The MTE approach, findings and answers to the 6 key evaluation questions set by the Governing Panel are documented in detail in the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Murray–Darling Water and Environmental Research Program report.

The evaluation did not review in any detail the actual research projects being undertaken, but rather focused on high level program processes. Detailed review of the research will be a task for the MD–WERP end of program evaluation.¹

The MTE provides 12 recommendations that would assist the Program to meet its objectives if implemented over the next 12 months. Seven of the recommendations are agreed by the Governing Panel and are being implementing as soon as practical. Four recommendations are agreed in principle, where the intent of the recommendation is agreed but alternative approaches are being taken. 1 recommendation is agreed in part, where some aspects of the recommendation are agreed but other are not. Progress on implementation of the recommendations will be included in the 2023-24 MD–WERP Annual Report.

¹ Hart, BT & Butcher, R (2023) Mid-Term Evaluation of the Murray–Darling Water and Environment Research Program (WERP), prepared for the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), Canberra.

Response to the MTE recommendations

This document sets out the Governing Panel response to each of the MTE recommendations and any actions being taken. Responses by the Governing Panel are defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Definition of responses to the MTE recommendations.

Response	Definition
Agree	All elements of the recommendation are supported by the Governing Panel.
Agree in principle	The Governing Panel generally support the intent or merit of the recommendation, but do not support the proposed approach for achieving the intended outcome.
Agree in part	The Governing Panel agree with one or more elements of the recommendation, but other elements either need further analysis or are not agreed.
For further consideration	Further analysis is required before the Governing Panel can make a decision on the recommendation.
Disagree	The recommendation is not supported by the Governing Panel.

Recommendation 1

The Governing Panel consider changes to improve diversity in membership, particularly through the inclusion of First Nations expertise.

Agree in principle

The Governing Panel agree diversity of membership of the Panel is important however notes that membership is based on delegated positions at DCCEE, CEWH and MDBA where the occupants of those particular positions are not determined at the discretion of the Panel.

The Governing Panel agrees that in hindsight, the inclusion of an independent First Nations GP member from the beginning of the Program would have been beneficial in engaging with First Nations groups early in the project design phase. However, given the Program is now more than halfway through implementation, adding a First Nations GP member would not provide additional benefits.

The MDBA's First Nations Leadership Group is currently providing an advisory role for First Nations engagement and project development (see response to Recommendation 9).

Recommendation 2

Consideration be given to merging the ELT and SLT, and including key members of the MDBA Basin Plan Review team – going forward their efforts should be focused more on the end products from MD-WERP and their adoption, particularly for the Basin Plan Review.

Agree in principle

This recommendation has been considered by the Governing Panel, ELT and SLT. It has been agreed the SLT and ELT should remain separate at this time given their differing purpose:

- ELT – provides strategic and operational oversight of the Program
- SLT – ensure delivery of the science “to address end-user needs and integration of the Program’s strategic research investment”.

The MD-WERP Implementation Team, Commonwealth Theme Leads and the Basin Plan Review (BPR) Project Management Office (PMO) have already commenced mapping which MD-WERP end products will inform the BPR, and how and when. These conversations and refinement of detail are ongoing between the MD-WERP Implementation team, Theme Leads, BPR Directors and the BPR PMO.

Recommendation 3

The Program and project management administrative requirements be reviewed to make them more streamlined and efficient - this should include development of an improved document archiving system and streamlining of the process for approval of deliverables and final reports.

Agree in part

The Governing Panel does not agree with the recommendation to streamline the deliverable approval process. Given the multiple levels of governance, the current process ensures the relevant partners (i.e. end-user groups, Commonwealth, researchers) have the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the deliverables.

The Implementation Team has recognised the deficiencies of the current archiving; a legacy of staff changes. Given the work demand of implementing the Program, contract management and secretariat, improving the document archiving system is not a priority. Inconsistencies in and improvements to current archiving are being noted and will be actioned by the Implementation Team as resourcing and time permits.

Recommendation 4

The Program Plan be updated or a new document prepared - this is a high-level description of MD–WERP, including the vision, objectives, all the relevant process, key documents, structure, staging, roles and responsibilities - it is a map of the complete program.

Agree in principle

The 2020 Program Plan states it “provides a high-level outline of key activities, deliverables and timelines to support the establishment of [MD–WERP]”. It is recognised that aspects of the Program Plan need updating to reflect changes since 2020.

The Implementation Team initiating the update of the Program Plan in early-mid 2023. However, priorities such as uplifting the contract management, annual symposium, secretariat responsibilities and processing the large number of deliverables, in addition to a reduction in resources, meant the Program Plan update did not progress.

Higher priorities remain for the Implementation Team and Governing Panel over the next 12 months. The Program Closure Report will document any changes in / progression of process, key documents, structure, staging, and roles and responsibilities.

Recommendation 5

A new document or an updated version of the EAP be prepared that clearly identifies the research (knowledge) outputs and how they will be used – this should include an updating of the Theme benefits maps to include detail on the products that will be produced and how they link to the benefits and Program objectives.

Agree

The Implementation Team has developed a ‘deliverables description template’ to be completed by the consortium partners for each planned contracted deliverable. The deliverable description is to include the purpose of the final deliverable and describe where and how the product is expected to impact/ feed into other key science and policy elements.

The Governing Panel agreed on an approach for identifying program benefits to refine and finalise the benefits mapping in March 2023, on the conditions that:

- the Implementation Team meet with the MDBA Project Delegate and MDBA Delegate to set the benefits mapping action planning approach
- engagement is focussed on linking MD–WERP research outputs and benefits realisation with Tier 1 stakeholders (direct users).

The updating/finalising of Theme benefits maps will progress over the coming months as resourcing of the Implementation Team improves. See also Recommendation 11.

Recommendation 6

Consideration be given to appointing one or more 'knowledge brokers' to assist in integrating and synthesising the research outputs into 'knowledge packages' to improve the likelihood of adoption in both the policy and management space and to help 'drive' the adoption process (Note: a clearer distinction between what is an output, outcome, impact and benefit is needed as these terms are frequently used interchangeably).

Agree in principle

The Governing Panel will be considering a proposal for the Communication, Engagement, Adoption and Transparency (CATE) investment stream, including engagement and adoption activities of the program, science to policy translation (e.g. synthesis) and science communication services. The Governing Panel approved in March 2024 the engagement of a CATE Delivery Partner to assist in integrating and synthesising research outputs and drive engagement and adoption.

Recommendation 7

The MERI Plan be updated as a priority to focus on the end of program evaluation including:

- a. outline the preferred approach and design of the end of program evaluation with reference to benefits realisation/change management outcomes; either designed by the evaluators or shared with the evaluators prior to commencing the outcome evaluation**
- b. include explicit consideration of how to undertake evaluation of First Nations projects in a culturally appropriate manner including closing the loop in an appropriate fashion**
- c. refine the key evaluation questions to ensure they better align to the Program objectives, intended outcomes and Basin Plan Review needs**
- d. update of the Theory of Change, if retained, to include assumptions (causal connections, events, and conditions) and feedback loops; alternatively refine the Program logic – neither are considered currently fit for purpose**
- e. provide clarity on the relationship to the benefit realisation mapping and measures of success**
- f. produce and implement the MERI Plans for each Theme – include sub-program logics (updated impact pathways may be fit for purpose) and cross reference/align to benefits realisation mapping**
- g. confirm the performance indicators to be monitored at Program, Theme and project level - identify and collect data to addresses performance measures and ensure data and reports are accessible to evaluators (database/document storage system)**
- h. clarify the audience needs for the evaluation and report**
- i. the end of program evaluation be undertaken by independent evaluators.**

Agree

The Governing Panel agrees with this recommendation and subcomponents. This will ensure a rigorous end of program evaluation which will support the development of new research programs in the future.

Recommendation 8

The CATE Framework is updated to explicitly state what are the Synthesis Activities (third investment stream) planned, how they will be targeted at appropriate end users, and who has responsibility for their creation and delivery.

Agree

The CATE Framework will be updated once the Governing Panel has endorsed a proposal for the Communication, Engagement, Adoption and Transparency (CATE) investment stream. A proposal was endorsed by the Governing Panel in March 2024 and the CATE Framework will be updated accordingly as that component of the Program progresses.

Recommendation 9

The Governing Panel seek further advice on ways to better engage with First Nations groups to ensure the current First Nations-led projects in Themes 3 and 4 are initiated and successfully completed.

Agree

The MDBA's First Nations Leadership Group is providing advice and supporting better engagement with First Nations groups – in particular acknowledging the time required to develop foundational relationships on which to co-design projects.

In the short-term, MD-WERP is exploring projects based on existing long-term relationships. In the intermediate term, MD-WERP is looking to match delivery expectations to long lead times for relationship building and co-design for self-determination.

The Program will also be looking to learn from the One Basin CRC project "Stories of One Basin": First Nations knowledge and Indigenous-led research to address climate change.

Recommendation 10

The Governing Panel give specific consideration to a process to action the Program objective: 'be a platform from which to launch a more enduring research program'. This could include: making the case for a continuing research program to support Basin Plan implementation into the future; consideration of the best model for such research (e.g., the current procurement, consultancy type model vs other models such as the National Environmental Science Program model); links to the One Basin CRC and other water research initiatives; how the lessons from the MD-WERP experience may be used to better focus an enduring water research program as part of the renewal of the National Water Initiative.

Agree

The MDBA has initiated the development of a long-term strategic science plan which will incorporate the outcomes and lessons learned from MD-WERP (including the MTE), the Basin Condition Monitoring Program and the broader science agenda for water reform.

Recommendation 11

The benefit realisation maps include the Tactical projects and Synthesis Activities outputs, and be updated to address realisation across the quadruple bottom line (environmental, economic, social and cultural).

Agree

The Governing Panel agrees with this recommendation. This work will be completed as part of the refinement and finalisation of the benefits mapping in the coming months (see Recommendation 5).

Recommendation 12

A 'lessons learned' document be developed to provide an enduring legacy focusing on leadership at all levels, interface between science-policy-management, and benefits - closing the loop. Further, the Governing Panel should consider how the MD-WERP data and documents are 'housed' so it is available in the future.

Agree

The Governing Panel agrees with this recommendation.

The Implementation Team is facilitating the Commonwealth Theme Leads and Coordinators, and MDBA Data Team, to discuss long-term data and document storage and access, including cataloguing submitted and future deliverables.

