

Environmental water delivery



Northern Basin initiatives



Sustainable diversion limit  
adjustment mechanism



Water recovery



Water resource plans



Australian Government



# December 2021 Report Card

**This Basin Report Card (the Report Card) provides an independent overview of progress implementing key activities under the Basin Plan for the 6 months from July to December 2021. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) monitors progress toward achieving a healthy, productive Basin.**

These 6 months saw positive improvements for many areas in the Murray-Darling Basin. Storage levels in many dams and lakes across the Basin reached peak capacity, with frequent water releases occurring to mitigate downstream flood risks. A wetter than average spring/summer across most of the Basin brought flooding to important wetlands and floodplain areas, and supported many agricultural industries. However, storm events and flooding also caused damage to crops and the inundation of some Basin towns, creating distress for many communities.

This Report Card shows several areas of success in implementing the Basin Plan. Recovering and delivering water for the environment, and the ongoing implementation of water resource plans by Basin state governments, are critical steps in achieving a sustainable Basin. The Report Card also shows areas where Basin jurisdictions continue to be challenged. In these areas, governments need to consider where actions can be fast-tracked, or where approaches can be adapted, to accelerate implementation, so that the outcomes of this complex reform can be achieved in the national interest.



The MDBA continues to listen to feedback from communities through the Basin Community Committee, the MDBA's regional engagement officers, staff located across our 6 regional offices, and through a wide range of stakeholder relationships. The feedback is clear – communities want greater transparency around decision-making processes in government. First Nations Australians across the Basin want to share their valuable traditional knowledge and work together with government to undertake actions to heal Country and deliver better outcomes on-ground.

Furthermore, Basin governments have established strong working relationships, which are key to achieving full implementation of complex water reform. All governments, however, need to continue to increase their focus on building and maintaining strong working relationships with all Basin stakeholders.

# About the Report

**The MDBA is a statutory authority of the Australian Government, established to provide independent, expert advice on the development and implementation of the Basin Plan. An important part of the MDBA's role is to assess and monitor the implementation and effectiveness of the Basin Plan.**

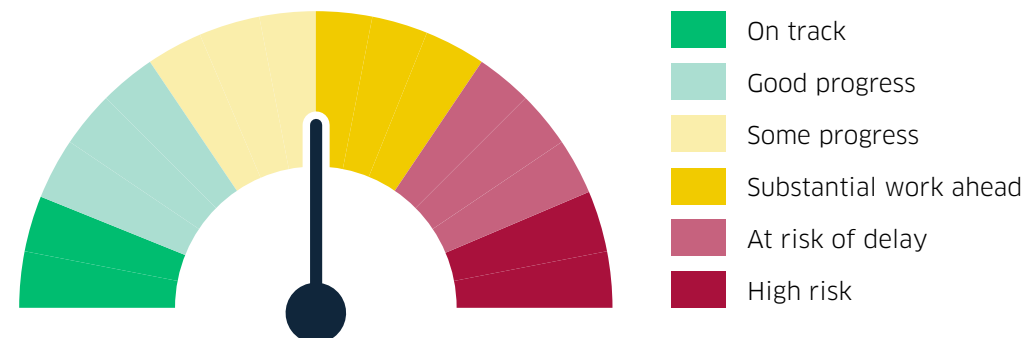
This Report Card is the seventh in the series, providing a short, timely and accurate update on progress in implementing the Basin Plan, to inform the Australian public. The Report Card includes stakeholder insights the MDBA has heard over the past 6 months from a wide range of sources, including the Basin Community Committee, regional engagement activities, peak bodies, social media, and the MDBA's public hotline and email inbox.

The Report Card does not assess on-ground Basin conditions or environmental and social trends occurring in the Basin. The MDBA's [2020 Basin Plan Evaluation](#), released in December 2020, provides the latest, most comprehensive report on this, along with recommendations for improvements to strengthen the social, cultural, economic and environmental outcomes being sought through the implementation of the Basin Plan.

The July 2021 Report Card assessed that some elements of the Basin Plan were on track and providing greater confidence to communities. Other areas were at risk of delay, requiring fast-tracking strategies and governments to clearly communicate updated plans that considered the lessons learned from program implementation. Since July 2021, some projects have continued to progress slowly, some programs have been re-designed based on community feedback, but the more challenging elements of Basin Plan implementation remain at risk.

This report card covers the period from 1 July to 31 December 2021.

## Guide to the ratings



# Assessment

The MDBA assessed the progress of the key activities of Basin Plan implementation. These activities are interconnected, and the Basin Plan needs all themes to progress in order to meet the requirements of a healthy and sustainable Basin.



## Water resource plans

Plans from Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory are accredited and in operation. The MDBA has provided guidance to Basin state governments on the process to amend water resource plans so the plans can evolve and adapt to new information and improvements.



## New South Wales water resource plans

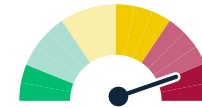
Over the past 18 months all 20 New South Wales plans were formally submitted to the MDBA, and then on advice from the MDBA were subsequently withdrawn for redrafting to make improvements and meet all requirements in the Basin Plan. Ministers agreed to a new resubmission process which will see all plans come through a second time for formal assessment in 2022. The MDBA continues to work closely with New South Wales to support re-drafting of the plans and progress toward accreditation.



## Water recovery

### *Bridging the gap*

Water recovery is close to completion, with approximately 98% of surface water and 92% of groundwater recovered as at 30 September 2021. There was no Bridging the Gap water recovery between 1 July and 31 December 2021.



## Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism - efficiency measures

The Off-farm Efficiency Program has replaced the Water Efficiency Program in response to slow progress and community concerns. Basin governments are working to identify and fast-track suitable projects for delivery by 2024. Reaching the full 450 gigalitres (GL) target remains challenging.



## Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism - supply and constraint measures

Basin governments have been working together to accelerate the planning and delivery of the sustainable diversion limit (SDL) adjustment mechanism projects. As noted in the 'December 2021 Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism (SDLAM) Assurance Report', some of these at-risk measures impact the ability of other measures to operate as envisaged by the *Basin Plan Amendment (SDL Adjustment) Instrument 2017*. The measures' interdependencies present challenges to achieving the originally envisaged environmental outcomes and anticipated water savings. There still remains substantial work to implement many of the SDLAM projects. Some projects are at high risk of not being completed by 2024, there are challenges to successfully achieving the originally envisaged environmental outcomes, and it is likely a reconciliation will be required.

# Assessment (continued)



## Northern Basin initiatives

Work has progressed under the joint government workplan. Ten environmental works projects approved by the Australian Government have progressed with business cases for 3 Gwydir constraints projects, and early on-grounds works commenced for the 4 projects identified for streamlined delivery. The projects will provide environmental benefits, stimulate local economies, and provide jobs, including for First Nations Australians.



## Environmental water delivery

Environmental water delivery continues to improve the health of the Basin's rivers and wetlands. Ongoing collaboration between river operators and across jurisdictions is needed to improve and mature delivery of water for the environment. Joint effort to improve communication is underway to provide communities with confidence that water for the environment is achieving outcomes.

## Compliance

Following amendments to the *Water Act 2007* (Cth) (the Water Act) and the *Basin Plan 2012*, the MDBA is no longer responsible for enforcing compliance with the Basin Plan. This responsibility now sits with the Inspector-General of Water Compliance (IGWC), which was formally established on 5 August 2021. The newly established IGWC has oversight of water management in the Basin, and inquiry powers to investigate the implementation of the Water Act, the Basin Plan and intergovernmental agreements, including the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement. In response to these new arrangements this Report Card has not assessed Basin Plan compliance.

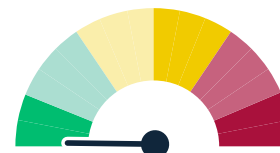
# Priority one

## Water resource plans



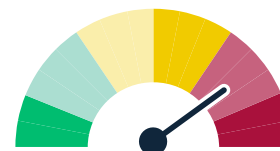
**Water resource plans are an integral element of implementing the Basin Plan, as they set the rules for how much water can be taken from the system, so that the sustainable diversion limits in each area are achieved over time. The plans also make sure that state and territory water management rules meet the Basin Plan requirements and include arrangements that strengthen water management at a local level.**

Water resource plans are developed by Basin governments, assessed by the MDBA, and accredited by the Australian Government Minister for Water. There are 33 plan areas in total, 19 for surface water, 19 for groundwater including 5 that cover both surface and groundwater.



### Water resource plans

Plans from Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory are accredited and in operation. The MDBA has provided guidance to Basin state governments on the process to amend water resource plans so the plans can evolve and adapt to new information and improvements.



### New South Wales water resource plans

Over the past 18 months all 20 New South Wales plans were formally submitted to the MDBA, and then on advice from the MDBA were subsequently withdrawn for redrafting to make improvements and meet all requirements in the Basin Plan. Ministers agreed to a new resubmission process which will see all plans come through a second time for formal assessment in 2022. The MDBA continues to work closely with New South Wales to support re-drafting of the plans and progress toward accreditation.

## Priority one (continued)

### Water resource plans



#### MDBA assessment

- Thirteen water resource plans across Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory have been accredited and are in operation.
- New South Wales continues to demonstrate commitment to implementing the Basin Plan through water resource plans. In June 2020 New South Wales submitted all 20 water resource plans to the MDBA for formal assessment.
- The MDBA has completed the assessment of all 20 water resource plans using the same [assessment framework](#) and level of effort applied to the water resource plans in all other states.
- These assessments identified inconsistencies with Basin Plan requirements, both policy related and technical issues, in all New South Wales plans. This is not unique to New South Wales – all other Basin state governments have had inconsistencies in their initial submitted plans, requiring withdrawal and resubmission before the plans could be recommended for accreditation.
- New South Wales has now withdrawn all 20 plans and advised they will be amended for consistency with the Basin Plan before resubmission for assessment.
- The Commonwealth and New South Wales Ministers responsible for Water agreed a new resubmission process which requires all plans to be submitted for formal assessment in 2022.
- On 21 December 2021, the Hon Kevin Anderson MP was appointed as the New South Wales Minister for Lands and Water.
- The New South Wales Government has reiterated its commitment to bring floodplain harvesting into the regulated system for the first time and achieve robust management of the water on the floodplain within the legal limits.
- On 17 December 2021 the then New South Wales Minister for Water made the *Water Management (General) Amendment Regulation 2021*, which effectively re-introduced the floodplain harvesting licensing, measurement and rainfall runoff exemption arrangements. The regulation takes effect from 14 February 2022 subject to disallowance. Floodplain harvesting arrangements will be incorporated in the relevant water resource plans.
- Water management will continue to evolve and changes to water resource plans are anticipated as new information comes to hand and management practices are improved. Amendments to plans will require assessment by the MDBA and accreditation by the Australian Government Minister responsible for water.
- [Water resource plan amendment guidelines](#) have been developed to guide Basin governments in the development of amended plans. It is anticipated that Basin governments will work closely with the MDBA prior to any amendment being submitted for assessment.

## Priority one (continued)

### Water resource plans



#### What we are hearing

- Water users and communities across the entire Basin remain concerned about floodplain harvesting and how it is managed under water resource plans.
- Stakeholders are encouraged to see water resource plans in operation and are keen for all plans to be finalised and in place to reduce uncertainty for Basin communities.
- Relevant First Nations have identified gaps and are concerned about whether the New South Wales plans meet expectations for what is required with regards to First Nations values, uses and consultation.



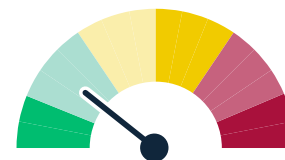
## Priority two

# Water recovery



**Sustainable diversion limits (SDLs) set how much water can be used whilst leaving enough water in the system to sustain natural ecosystems. The Australian Government implements a range of measures to achieve the SDLs set out in the Basin Plan. The program has involved a combination of water efficiency projects and purchasing of water entitlements in the market. The water entitlements recovered under the program are passed to the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder as licences and must be used to achieve Basin Plan environmental watering objectives.**

**Bridging the Gap** is the primary water recovery target in the Basin Plan. In 2018 this target was revised to 2,075 GL/y as a result of 2 amendments to the Basin Plan, one as a result of the [Northern Basin Review](#) and [scientific reviews of groundwater systems](#), and the other to reflect the SDL adjustment mechanism. This revised target is dependent on the SDL adjustment mechanism projects being delivered by 2024.



### Water recovery

Water recovery is close to completion, with approximately 98% of surface water and 92% of groundwater recovered as at 30 September 2021. There was no *Bridging the Gap* water recovery between 1 July and 31 December 2021.

### MDBA assessment

- At a Basin scale about 98% of the current surface water recovery target is complete. As of 30 September 2021, 46 GL/y remains to be recovered to meet the Basin Plan target of 2,075 GL/y.
- All Basin jurisdictions have updated their 'cap factors' which are conversion factors that allow different types of water entitlements to be counted on equal terms. These factors help to determine if the correct amount of water has been recovered in each region. The New South Wales 'cap factors' will be finalised when water resource plans are accredited.
- The total amount of water recovered across the Basin is 2,106.9 GL, which is higher than the overall target of 2,075 GL/y. There are local and shared water recovery targets in the Basin Plan that must still be met at the catchment-scale. There has been minor over-recovery in some catchments and Australian Government agencies have agreed to develop a timeline and process for managing this.

## Priority two (continued)

### Water recovery

- For groundwater, 92% of water has been recovered – as at 30 September 2021, a further 3.2 GL/y of recovery is required to meet the Basin Plan target of 38.45 GL/y.

#### What we are hearing

- There are communities that are pleased the government has listened and shifted the focus to off-farm water recovery.
- Some southern Basin communities remain concerned about potential water buybacks if water recovery targets are not met, or SDLAM projects not delivered by 2024. Some in the northern Basin have an appetite for proactively exploring recovering more water in ways that would minimise further socio-economic impacts.
- People view water recovery for the environment as a positive step but are concerned that a warming climate will mean the water recovered for the environment will not be enough to maintain healthy rivers and wetlands.



## Priority three

# Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism

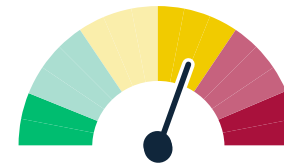


The Basin Plan sets [sustainable diversion limits \(SDLs\)](#), which are limits on how much water can be used in the Murray–Darling Basin, while leaving enough water to sustain the environment. In 2012, Basin state governments included a mechanism to adjust these limits in the Basin on the basis that there may be alternative ways to run the system that still achieve equivalent environmental outcomes, with less water. The [SDL adjustment mechanism \(SDLAM\)](#), adopted for the southern Basin only, involves 3 elements that work together – namely ‘supply’ and ‘constraints’ projects that improve river management and achieve equivalent environmental outcomes with less water, and ‘efficiency measures’ that recover water for the environment through modernised infrastructure that increases water use efficiency.

Basin state governments brought forward 36 supply and constraints projects in July 2017. The 2017 SDLAM draft determination found that these measures, as a package, could deliver an offset of 605 GL/y, meaning 605 GL/y less water would need to be recovered from consumptive users such as towns, communities, farmers and industries. Basin state governments are responsible for the design and implementation of these projects with Australian Government funding.

Under the SDLAM water efficiency measures program, \$1.5 billion has been set aside to recover 450 GL of water by 2024 (efficiency measures). The Basin Plan requires that efficiency measures have neutral or positive socio-economic outcomes for Basin communities.

Under the Basin Plan, the MDBA is required to assess whether the notified measures have been implemented as proposed and achieved the adjustment initially determined in 2017. Leading up to this decision, the MDBA will conduct assurance on the progress and expected outcomes of the notified measures. If the notified measures are not implemented, or are amended in a way that would impact on the outcomes as per the 2017 determination, the Authority must undertake a reconciliation of the adjustment, which may lead to a revision of the sustainable diversion limit adjustment volume.



### Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism – supply and constraints measures

Basin governments have been working together to accelerate the planning and delivery of the sustainable diversion limit (SDL) adjustment mechanism projects. As noted in the ‘December 2021 Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism (SDLAM) Assurance Report’, some of these at-risk measures impact the ability of other measures to operate as envisaged by the *Basin Plan Amendment (SDL Adjustment) Instrument 2017*. The measures’ interdependencies present challenges to achieving the originally envisaged environmental outcomes and anticipated water savings. There still remains substantial work to implement many of the SDLAM projects. Some projects are at high risk of not being completed by 2024, there are challenges to successfully achieving the originally envisaged environmental outcomes, and it is likely a reconciliation will be required.

## Priority three (continued)

# Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism

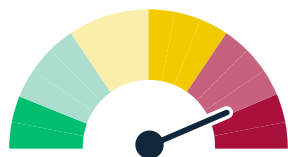
### MDBA assessment

- In April 2021, an [independent report](#) by Indec on the status of the [36 supply and constraint projects](#) noted:
  - 15 projects are now in operation, and a further 15 projects have made good progress and should be delivered before June 2024, representing approximately 74% of the offset volume
  - 7 projects are not on track and are at significant risk of not being operational by June 2024 due to their complex nature and significant challenges (note: the additional project identified is the Goulburn Constraint Measure, which is not considered for adjustment volumes, but does contribute to the outcomes of the Enhanced Environmental Water Delivery project).
- Since the Indec report was published, project progress has been made, however considerable risk remains around the 2024 timeframe for full delivery.
- The first stage of the Enhanced Environmental Water Delivery project has commenced. As part of this first stage, the MDBA in collaboration with New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia has established project management and governance arrangements, commenced a program of early technical investigations, and is preparing an implementation plan to support any decision to proceed to implementation.
- New South Wales' accelerated projects, noted by the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council in April 2021, are progressing with design work and engagement activities. The 'Reconnecting River Country' constraints program is progressing in line with its project plan. The 'Structural and operational changes at Menindee Lakes, including the Lower Darling key focus area constraint project' and the 'Improved flow management works at the Murrumbidgee River Yanco Creek offtake', have been re named the 'Better Baaka' and 'Better Bidgee' projects respectively. Options for these 2 projects are being re-scoped, which may require consideration by Basin governments and notification of the projects' amendments under the Basin Plan.
- The 'Constraints Measures' projects in the Murrumbidgee, Goulburn and Murray Rivers need to progress in close consultation with communities to find solutions to removing operational and physical constraints. Discussions with affected landholders need to continue, to have the necessary agreements in place. South Australia is making progress in its key focus area and is on track to have its project completed by 2024. New South Wales has commenced its Reconnecting River Country program (a reimagined constraints measures suite of projects). In Victoria, to progress the Constraints Measures program, a project team has been appointed to deliver early activities such as program planning, while a stocktake and review of technical work has also begun.
- There still remains substantial work to implement many of the SDLAM projects. Some projects are at high risk of not being completed by 2024, there are challenges to successfully achieving the originally envisaged environmental outcomes, and it is likely a reconciliation will be required.
- If the SDLAM package of notified measures is not implemented (or is changed in a way that would impact on the 605 GL/year adjustment amount under the 2017 determination), the MDBA must undertake a reconciliation in 2024, which may lead to a revision of the adjustment amount.
- A [framework](#) outlining how the MDBA will approach this reconciliation has been developed in consultation with Basin governments. This framework provides the Authority's proposed approach to the reconciliation decision, including the role of assurance, and clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the Authority and Basin governments.



## Priority three (continued)

### Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism



#### Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism – efficiency measures

The Off-farm Efficiency Program has replaced the Water Efficiency Program in response to slow progress and community concerns. Basin governments are working to identify and fast-track suitable projects for delivery by 2024. Reaching the full 450 GL target will be challenging.

#### MDBA assessment

- In September 2020, the [Independent Panel on Social and Economic Conditions in the Basin](#) recommended that, where possible, off-farm recovery should be a preferred approach for recovering water when it reduces the impact on the consumptive pool.
- The Australian Government is working with Basin jurisdictions to develop off-farm infrastructure projects via the [Off-farm Efficiency Program](#). The program has 2 streams, one being \$1.33 billion for state-led projects and the other is \$150 million for grants provided direct to applicants. A further \$60 million has also been made available for on-farm projects proposed by states that have strong community support and can demonstrate neutral or positive economic outcomes.

- The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment is currently assessing (at 25 November 2021) a New South Wales project in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area and an urban stormwater project from South Australia.
- As at 30 September 2021, water recovery from Efficiency Measures of 18.5 GL/y (Long Term Average Annual Yield – LTAAAY) has been either registered with the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder or is under contract – including 15.9 GL/y LTAAAY (contracted) from Victoria's Goulburn Murray Water – Water Efficiency Project.
- If the supply and constraints projects are delivered in full, the efficiency measures program needs to recover a minimum of 62 GL/y for the full 605 GL sustainable diversion limit adjustment.
- Based on recovery to date, ongoing effort to accelerate the delivery of the efficiency (and constraints and supply) projects is needed.
- The second Review of the Water for the Environment Special Account commenced in August 2021. This review builds on the first review completed in March 2020. The second review is expected to be made public in the first half of 2022.

## Priority three (continued)

### **Sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism**

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#### **What we are hearing**

- Stakeholders want to see leadership from all governments to work together on the SDL adjustment mechanism – there is frustration with the inconsistent approach of governments and concern about project delays and meeting agreed deadlines.
- There is recognition that constraints projects are complex and need to be carefully planned with the community to address the barriers to delivering water for the environment, and that this will take time.
- Communities want ongoing engagement in project design and delivery in their local area, and to be kept informed of progress.



## Priority four

# Northern Basin initiatives

**There are several initiatives underway in the northern Basin to better manage water for local communities, the environment and future generations. This includes a range of diverse projects, known as the 'toolkit measures' and the 'Basin Commitments Package'.**

The Northern Basin Review (2017) resulted in a 70 GL reduction to the 390 GL water recovery target in the north, on the basis that the New South Wales and Queensland governments adopted a range of ['toolkit measures'](#) with assistance from the Australian Government.

The Basin Plan was amended in 2018 to reflect this outcome, and at that time the [Basin Commitments Package](#) was also announced with bipartisan support for further initiatives. Following the Menindee fish death events and the subsequent 2019 Vertessy Independent Panel review, the Australian Government announced an additional response package, which included significant funding to improve northern Basin monitoring and compliance, protect native fish and improve river management.

Together, these initiatives are intended to protect water for the environment, improve compliance with water laws, improve river management across the northern Basin, and create opportunities for local communities, including First Nations Australians.



### Northern Basin Initiatives

A joint government workplan has been agreed, and there has been good progress implementing new management measures. Ten environmental works projects approved by the Australian Government have also progressed with business cases submitted for 3 Gwydir constraints projects and early on ground works commenced for the 4 accelerated projects. The projects will provide environmental benefits, stimulate local economies and provide jobs, including for First Nations Australians.

### MDBA assessment

- The Basin governments' agreed work plan to implement the toolkit measures, and progress updates, are available on the [MDBA website](#).
- There has been good progress implementing the policy and management measures in the 'toolkit'. Key milestones achieved include New South Wales implementation of 'active management' to protect held environmental water along the Barwon-Darling and through the lower Gwydir and lower Macquarie unregulated river systems; and new





## Priority four (continued)

### Northern Basin initiatives

arrangements in place to account for held environment water crossing the Queensland–New South Wales border.

- Australian Government funding has been made available to Queensland and New South Wales for the approved 10 environmental works projects. A number of these projects have commenced early on ground activities including site surveys and initial stakeholder consultation. The New South Wales Government has negotiated access to streamlined funding for 3 of its 6 environmental works projects and has indicated its intention to commence stakeholder engagement and some construction in 2022.
- New South Wales has also submitted business cases for 3 Gwydir constraints projects in November 2021 for Australian Government assessment, with Queensland-led business cases due in June 2022. Decisions on implementation funding for these projects will be determined by the Australian Government Minister for Water.
- Ministers have agreed that all measures would be operational by 30 June 2024. At this stage, delivering the larger, more complex environmental works projects within this timeframe will be challenging and there is a significant risk that agreed implementation timeframes will not be met. Ministers will further consider project implementation timeframes in 12 months time when project development activities for all projects have been completed and project delivery timeframes are better understood.
- The toolkit includes a requirement for remaining water recovery in the northern Basin to be targeted based on social, economic and environmental considerations. However, further progress towards achieving the 320 GL target in recent years has slowed. The Australian

Government is committed to continuing to recover water to bridge the gap in the northern catchments through off-farm infrastructure projects. A plan and timeframe for achieving the remaining northern Basin water recovery is needed.

- The coordination of environmental watering (a specific toolkit measure) continues to mature. There have been 3 coordinated, joint environmental releases to achieve whole of north connected flows since 2018. The Northern Basin Environmental Watering Group has been established to help improve the planning and delivery of water for the environment across the northern Basin.

#### What we are hearing

- Northern Basin communities live through the ‘boom and bust’ of the northern system. The widespread rainfall during 2021 has vastly improved storage levels and provided full connectivity of the Darling (Baaka) River from the Queensland–New South Wales border through to Menindee Lakes, which filled in mid-September 2021 for the first time since 2012.
- First Nations Australians’ culture and identity relies on a healthy river – if the river stops flowing community wellbeing suffers.
- Approval of some toolkit projects is welcome progress, but communities are eager for on-ground delivery and more information on implementation progress, including opportunities to provide input. The community wants these measures implemented to deliver the best possible outcomes.
- The toolkit measures are a great complement to environmental water, they are initiatives that the community can really get behind.



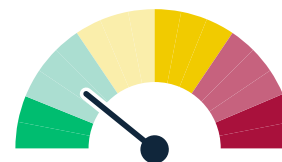


## Priority five

# Planning and delivery of environmental water

**The health of our rivers is crucial for all Australians. Water for the environment is used to improve the health of rivers, wetlands and floodplains, which benefits communities and industries. Water is allocated to environmental water holders across the Basin, who make decisions about when, where and how much water is released for the environment. Stakeholders and partners including government agencies, advisory groups and community and First Nation groups contribute to many environmental watering decisions.**

Six organisations hold water for the environment across the Basin. The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder has the largest portfolio of water entitlements, and works with other environmental water holders and river operators to manage environmental water across the whole Basin. The MDBA provides advice and guidance to support environmental water holders to plan when and where to release environmental flows, primarily through the MDBA Basin-wide Watering Strategy and the Annual Environmental Watering Priorities. The MDBA also manages water for the environment held under the Joint Government Living Murray program.



### Environmental water delivery

Environmental water delivery continues to support the health of the Basin's rivers and wetlands and was particularly important through the recent drought. Collaboration between river operators and across jurisdictions to improve and mature water for the environment delivery processes needs to continue. Joint effort to improve communication is underway to provide communities with confidence that water for the environment is achieving outcomes.

### MDBA assessment

- The MDBA's [2020 Basin Plan Evaluation](#) found that the delivery of water for the environment has been crucial for sustaining water-dependent ecosystems during the recent drought.
- Both the [Northern Basin Environmental Watering Committee](#) and the [Southern Connected Basin Environmental Watering Committee](#) are operating effectively, and provide a focus



## Priority five (continued)

### Planning and delivery of environmental water

for multi catchment coordination and cross border connectivity. Environmental water holders, Basin governments and Australian Government agencies undertake extensive planning before the start of each water year for different climate scenarios and are well prepared for all conditions.

- The Environmental Water Committee is now providing high level advice to better integrate environmental water delivery and river operations to improve river health outcomes.
- Environmental water managers continue to work with a range of First Nations Australians and organisations to [better integrate cultural objectives](#) into the management of water for the environment. Key partners include Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations and Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations.
- Even though recent months have been relatively wet, environmental water is playing an important role to fill gaps between inflows, mimicking some of the flows that would have occurred naturally if not for river regulation. This helps maintain water levels in key rivers, floodplains and wetlands to help birds, fish and plants flourish.
- [Key sites](#) along the Murray are monitored each year and are showing sustained improvements in condition where water can be delivered and works operated.
- Considerable improvements have been made to the implementation of environmental water protection measures across the Basin. This includes new cross-border accounting arrangements between Queensland and New South Wales that recognises water for the

environment as it flows across the border, a measure implemented under the Northern Basin Toolkit.

- Basin government policy or rule changes should not unnecessarily limit or restrict delivery of water for the environment or decrease its current level of protection. Basin jurisdictions should consider this requirement early in any process that looks to change operational rules, including the construction and operation of new infrastructure.
- The risk remains that incomplete water recovery in key catchments, lack of progress to remove constraints, and changes to river operation rules that impact on the ability to deliver environmental water, will continue to limit the ability to achieve the ecological outcomes under the Basin Plan.
- Work to understand how to better prioritise, invest in, assess, and integrate natural resource measures with water management and environmental watering remains critical to achieve better Basin outcomes.

#### What we are hearing

- The Australian public want to know what and where water for the environment is being used, and the difference that it's making to rivers and wetlands.
- Some people feel more secure about the future knowing there is water for the environment – for green spaces and a natural environment – but climate change and its impacts are a significant concern.
- There remain concerns about what impact proposed new dams may have on planned environmental water.



**Office locations** – *First Nations Country*

**Adelaide** – *Kurna*

**Canberra** – *Ngunnawal*

**Goondiwindi** – *Bigambul*

**Griffith** – *Wiradjuri*

**Mildura** – *Latji Latji*

**Murray Bridge** – *Ngarrindjeri*

**Toowoomba** – *Jarowair and Wakka Wakka*

**Wodonga** – *Dhudhuroa*



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