

Peaks Roundtable Wrap Up | 11 July 2024

Peak attendees: Basin Community Committee, Murray River Group of Councils, Wentworth Group, Nature Conservation Council of NSW, Lifeblood Alliance, Inland Rivers Network, Qld Conservation Council, Australian Floodplain Association, NRM Regions Australia, NSW Irrigators Council, South Australian Murray Irrigators, Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, NSW Farmers, Primary Producers SA, Dried Fruits Australia, Australian Water Brokers Association, Murray-Darling Conservation Alliance, Dairy Australia, National Farmers Federation and NFF Water Committee, and Victorian Farmers Federation.

MDBA Update

Chief Executive Mr Andrew McConville covered the following items:

- The release of the Commonwealth Government's targeted Voluntary Water Purchase Program to recover up to 70GL in the southern connected Basin. He mentioned that Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) officials were on the call to provide further information.
- Reinforced the MDBA is supportive of measures assisting in full implementation of the Basin Plan.
- The different role the MDBA plays and that it has appropriate levels of independence from Government enabling it to offer advice, provide information and make recommendations to policy and program departments like DCCEEW.
- The launch of the Early Insights Paper (EIP) for the Basin Plan Review at the MDBA's River Reflections conference and receiving people's initial impressions.
- The MDBA is on track with the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation with all information needed to undertake the evaluation to be collected by the deadline of the end of October this year. The Evaluation will draw on our comprehensive scientific assessment of the Basin, the Sustainable Rivers Audit, providing important insights on the current trend and condition of our rivers, wetlands and lakes and expanded to also examine the condition of our towns and communities and First Nations people from a social, Cultural and economic perspective.
- In August and September, the MDBA will be holding workshops with representatives from the 50 First Nations of the Basin to look back to inform the Evaluation and to continue discussions with First Nations people about improving the Basin as the Review progresses.
- Regarding operational matters, Mr McConville spoke about the trial to connect the northern and southern Basin by enabling environmental water from the northern catchments into the Murray River to address salinity and blue green algae issues.
- The Annual Operating Outlook will be published in August outlining how the MDBA will operate the River Murray system for the coming year, with the risk of shortfall reduced with shared resource available in Menindee Lakes.
- An outcome of the Barmah-Millewa Feasibility Study is the establishment of the Water Delivery Optimisation Program. While initial work has been slow, work is progressing. An agreement has been signed with Murray Irrigation Limited to renew and enhance the agreement to use their channel to move water around the Barmah-Millewa Reach. The MDBA continues to engage with First Nations and other stakeholders to further understand the environmental and Cultural significance of the reach.

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW)

- The 2024 tender for 70GL opens the week of 15 July. The expression of interest (EOI) process to identify interest for next year commences in Aug/Sept 2024. Subject to program approval and informed by the EOI outcomes, the related tenders will open Q1 and Q2 2025 (calendar year). The published trading strategy (page 7) outlines the approach [Restoring Our Rivers - Trading Strategy \(dcceew.gov.au\)](https://www.dcceew.gov.au/restoring-our-rivers-trading-strategy). Areas that are in scope exclusions are referenced in Figure 3 (page 5).
- More information on the [Restoring Our Rivers: Framework](#) released on 4 July 2024 will be provided at an online public webinar at 12:00pm (AEST) on 17 July 2024. The webinar will run for 60 minutes. The panel will be hosted by DCCEEW and include representatives from DCCEEW and the Murray–Darling Basin Authority. [Register for our Public Webinar: Restoring Our Rivers: Implementing the Murray–Darling Basin Plan in full](#) More details and resources located here: https://linktr.ee/dcceew_water

Early Insights Paper – panel discussion with Professor Stuart Bunn (Authority member), Tim Goodes (Executive Director Basin Plan) and Grace Mang (General Manager, Basin Plan Review Strategy and Integration).

- Ms Mang recapped on the Early Insights Paper and reminded participants it is not a science paper. It has been shared to provide insights and thought-starters on the various challenges the MDBA is facing and how we can collectively improve the Basin Plan to better tackle these challenges into the future.
- Mr Goodes and Prof. Bunn responded to what we have heard so far across various topics including: uncertainty with a changing climate, scientific knowledge and evidence-base, supporting resilient communities, engagement and outcomes and equity facilitated for First Nations.

Constraints relaxation implementation roadmap

- Dr Katupitiya recapped on what constraints are, where the projects are located, the history of the constraints management strategy and projects, and the purpose of the roadmap to focus on cross-jurisdictional issues and describe pathways for governments to resolve issues. He also spoke to the cross-jurisdictional issues being considered.

What we heard from participants in the Peaks Roundtable

Some participants expressed their ongoing opposition to the Commonwealth Government’s voluntary water purchase framework, particularly the recovery from the southern Basin over the next 12 months. Concern was expressed about market disruption and negative impacts on communities.

There was a desire to know more about the social and economic conditions in the MDBA’s work including the Basin Plan Evaluation.

Environmental groups were keen to know more about the fish deaths in the Coorong Southern Lagoon. Mr McConville noted the SA Government’s lead on that situation with support where required from the MDBA.

From an environmental perspective on the Early Insights Paper, it was suggested that the ‘theme of the heading "Moving Beyond 'Just Add Water" could be changed to "Water +". It was felt there is an inherent criticism in the language of 'moving beyond' that implies a previous failure or the wrong approach. Returning water to the system remains a critical/core outcome that delivers real value. The challenge moving forward is to maximise the full value of the water by ensuring the range of things such as rules, policy and constraints, in addition to the water. It was suggested that a change of language/tone in describing this shift would reinforce this *additionality*, rather than leave the impression that adding water is not helpful and other measures are required instead’.

The MDBA acknowledged it was challenging for the Authority to convey clarity on intent in this section of the EIP and there is always room for improvement.

A participant reflected that the EIP does not appear to recognise the changes in industry over time with irrigated agriculture and permanent plantings shifting downstream and associated challenges of water delivery including environmental impacts of higher-level delivery requirements.

There was interest in the Constraints Relaxation Implementation Roadmap and understanding what help is needed. There was also commentary on the need for DCCEE and the MDBA to lead on liability and risk management to achieve a coordinated approach across the states. There was a query about how much Constraints projects contribute to the offset as part of the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) adjustment. The MDBA noted back in 2020 that if all SDLAM projects were implemented as notified the constraints projects, when completed, were estimated to contribute about 70-90GL to the offset.

Among some participants there was a desire to see diverse stakeholders come together in specifically focused forums and self-organise to determine common ground and ways forward. There was also a view about the need to deal with current issues before being able to address the future. Ensuring people were genuinely endorsed as leaders in their communities was noted too. There was also a desire for greater involvement of groups not currently represented in engagement forums and to generate broader ownership of Basin matters, including a local evidence base.

There was a desire expressed to give credit to the many community leaders who have consistently contributed to the Basin Plan over the past 12 years and encouragement to highlight the success stories along the journey of the Basin Plan, while acknowledging ongoing challenges.

In a discussion about future engagement, it was suggested that any tours or road trips undertaken by the MDBA in regional communities be promoted well in advance.

Water literacy was raised as an ongoing issue requiring further attention to improve understanding of Basin water management. There was also an emphasis on continuing to listen to communities and demonstrate how they have contributed and made a difference. Communities negatively impacted by decisions need to be heard too.

Bringing young people into conversations about the health and sustainability of the Basin was raised. The MDBA said this has been mentioned in multiple forums and there is a possibility of holding a specific youth event.

Key questions

Q. Are you considering extremes as averages for climate scenarios?

A. Yes. We are trying to better understand preparing for and recovery from extreme events for social, economic and environmental outcomes in the Basin. Also, the Basin Plan Review's hydroclimate approach will allow us to look at high, medium and low scenarios.

Q. Will the Sustainable Rivers Audit include a comprehensive reconciliation of modelled water vs actual water? Or will that reconciliation be included in the Basin Plan Evaluation?

A. The Sustainable Rivers Audit looks back to what water has been available, not what was modelled.

Q. While considering a range of potential climate scenarios is appropriate, due to the level of uncertainty and variability, strong attention needs to be paid to low(er) likelihood / higher impact scenarios. Ensuring enough resilience/capacity is factored in to deal with 'step change' shifts in rainfall and/or temperature is essential. This requires a more 'climate conservative' approach than what has been outlined so far.

A. Our approach should allow us to do this. Engaging on how the MDBA and the Basin Plan can respond is key. By sharing Sustainable Yields forecasts, we can have a really good evidence base for this discussion.

Q. BP evaluation: Do MD-WERP projects actually support a Basin Plan Review? Much of the field science has been in watered areas, need evidence from the 'gaps' – wetlands / floodplains which have not been watered how will SRA contribute? It's not very clear how the review of the BP is different from contemplating the future of the BP.

A. We're doing work on low-flow scenarios and predictive modelling under a changed climate. The field science hasn't all been in watered areas. MD-WERP started in 2020 to strengthen scientific knowledge. It's looking at social and First Nations aspects as well as the environment. We are actively driving uptake of that work for the Basin Plan Review. MD-WERP will conclude mid-2025.

Q. Will the protection of Planned Environmental Water (PEW) be prioritised as the climate warms?

A. We are certainly looking at how non-entitlement water, including PEW is impacted. Taking a case study and modelled approach (understanding the assumptions made on rules and operator behaviour) at the moment.

Q. Can I confirm that the approach to the Review assumes the Basin Plan will be delivered in full? In which case, what's the plan for recovering the balance of the 605GL by Dec 2026?

A. For the review of SDL and associated environmental outcomes - the EIP states we will look at the envelope from 2024 implementation and bookend that with full implementation when it comes to modelling.

Q. MLDRIN has raised concerns about the quality of the Looking Backwards to Move Forward Report. There are very significant gaps in the literature presented in this document. As it stands, the draft document as last seen by MLDRIN will not position First Nations to be appropriately informed. MLDRIN's concerns, as well as the concerns of academics, have not been addressed.

A. The upcoming workshops with First Nations' people is aimed at hearing feedback like this. If we haven't reflected appropriately, we want that feedback.

Q. Will the Authority consider legislating that the Environmental Water Requirements in the long-term Water Plans must be achieved?

A. It is certainly in the mix. We are grappling with what's the sufficient flexibility needed for States and Environmental Water Holders to achieve environmental watering outcomes.

Q. Following from response around contracted MD-WERP research projects - how will other science be incorporated e.g. Wentworth Group, Australian Rivers Institute, Goyder Institute for Water Research?

A. Keen to engage with anyone who wants to provide information, for example the Wentworth Group shared a paper recently and MDBA included some data sets. We are happy to work with anyone on this and understand differing views across the science community while utilising best available science. We are also focusing on how we work alongside First Nations people in sharing their knowledge and also partnering with First Nations on place-based science. We have a long commitment to this and creating ongoing programs of work, not just projects.

Requests

- To provide a comprehensive document that clearly articulates all the First Nations led, designed and implemented research conducted as part of MD-WERP.
- Summary of how MD-WERP has supported setting the baseline for First Nations designed, led and implemented science so that the best available science can be realised in the Basin Plan will be highly valued by MLDRIN.
- Financial support to help groups travel to conferences and participate in submission processes.

Comments

Some concerns were raised about the quality of the Looking Back to Move Forward report regarding the literature presented and that feedback to date had not been addressed. The MDBA's upcoming workshops with First Nations will invite feedback about any gaps in the report and seek to establish a way forward.

One Peak representative commented about the 'need to maintain a strong and transparent evidence base for balanced decision making which seeks beneficial outcomes for local communities and minimises ability for overreach for political points scoring which is removed from those communities'.

Next steps

- The Basin Plan Review team will be considering all feedback on the Early Insights Paper and using it to shape next steps.
- The feedback on the Looking Back to Move Forward report will be discussed in the workshops being held with First Nations in August and September.
- The MDBA will publish a report on the Early Insights Paper workshop from River Reflections in the coming days.
- An Early Insights Paper webinar will be held in the next month with the date to be advised.
- The next round of MDBA market research is now underway and some of you may be contacted and asked if you would like to participate. The MDBA undertakes market research every three years, and the target is shared through the key performance indicator that focuses on improved transparency, ensuring stakeholders are aware of and understand the MDBA's role.
- The next Peaks Roundtable is on Thursday 21 November from 9.30am AEST.
- Please contact us with any further feedback or queries at: engagement@mdba.gov.au

