

4 November 2011

Murray-Darling Basin water ministers meet in Canberra

Murray-Darling Basin ministers met today in Canberra and were briefed on key aspects of the draft Basin Plan. This was the first meeting of ministers under the newly-named Legislative and Governance Forum on the Murray-Darling Basin. The new name for the Forum reflects the outcome of a review by the Council of Australian Governments.

Those attending included the Chair, the Hon Tony Burke MP (Commonwealth); the Hon Katrina Hodgkinson (New South Wales); the Hon Peter Walsh (Victoria); the Hon Paul Caica (South Australia); the Hon Rachel Nolan (Queensland) and Mr Simon Corbell (Australian Capital Territory).

Ministers welcomed the appointment of Ms Diana Gibbs from Cootamundra, NSW, as the new member of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. Ms Gibbs will bring substantial expertise as a resource economist and a practical understanding of regional development issues to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

The Hon Craig Knowles, Chair of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (the Authority), briefed ministers on the Authority's deliberations on preparation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, including environmental water requirements, sustainable diversion limits, scientific and socio-economic input and advice, and the role of localism and adaptive management.

Ministers noted the Authority would make available more detailed information about the science underpinning the proposed water recovery targets and sustainable diversion limits at the time the draft Basin Plan is released.

The Authority, Basin states and the ACT have been participating in discussions on the draft Basin Plan through an intensive series of working meetings over the past four months. Mr Knowles expressed his appreciation for the constructive and considered advice provided by jurisdictions throughout this process.

The Authority confirmed that it is actively considering feedback on how communities want to be consulted in the 20-week public comment period and that this consultation will include public meetings.

Ministers were advised that the water availability outlook for 2011-12 is promising and there was a very large volume of carryover from 2010-11 and 2011-12. They also heard that state allocations are gradually increasing, with some products already at maximum levels. The volume of water in government storages across the Basin continues to rise steadily with storage now at 88 per cent of capacity. In the northern Basin storage is at 72 per cent of capacity. River Murray System storage is at 92 per cent, its highest level since December 2000.

Other outcomes from the meeting were the approval of amendments to the 2011-12 corporate plan for the Authority, approval of new 'Cap' arrangements for the NSW Border Rivers, endorsement of The Living Murray icon site environmental water management plans, and

approval to list an additional 1 gigalitre of South Australian water on The Living Murray environmental water register.

Central to the implementation of the Basin Plan in the lead-up to the 2015 review point is consideration of how existing river management arrangements and environmental works and measures could be addressed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of delivering environmental water.

Ministers noted that a work program to assess the potential for new and revised arrangements would now be developed.

In the context of the draft Basin Plan, Ministers acknowledged the importance of a common and agreed set of 'cap' factors throughout the Basin in order to provide clarity to entitlement holders about the amount of water recovered for the environment. Ministers noted that the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities will amend its water recovery website by reverting to its previous 'cap' factors. Ministers also acknowledged the importance of this issue in respect of efficient operation of water markets and third party impacts.

Ministers discussed the proposed pathway for implementing the Basin Plan, and considered the Authority's advice on the environmental watering plan, salinity targets, and alignment of state plans with the Basin Plan including that sustainable diversion limits are proposed to take effect from 2019.

Ministers noted the importance of localism in environmental watering programs. Ministers requested the Authority consider strengthening the draft legislative instrument and other mechanisms in the draft Basin Plan to use existing state frameworks and community based networks in the management of Commonwealth environmental water before releasing the draft Basin Plan.

Ministers heard a report from the Chair of the Basin Community Committee (BCC), Ms Joan Burns, on community consultation to date on the draft Basin Plan.

Ministers thanked the BCC for its hard work over recent months, during which it has provided invaluable advice on socio-economic considerations; on the role of localism; and on effective communication and engagement with local communities.

Ministers noted progress of \$6 million in feasibility assessment funding directed to seventeen state-led environmental works and measures projects. Ultimately these projects aim to inform more water-efficient environmental outcomes for the Basin's rivers and wetlands. Details of the projects are [attached](#).

ENDS

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ENVIRONMENTAL WORKS AND MEASURES FEASIBILITY PROGRAM

PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

New South Wales

1. Assist New South Wales to deliver feasibility investigations including, the costs, risks and benefits, of the following environmental works and measures sub-projects that have the potential to offset sustainable diversion limits (SDLs):
 - (a) Euston Lake restoration and improved water efficiency sub-project (\$0.4 million) will undertake a range of feasibility studies to investigate the management of Euston Lakes to assess water efficiencies and environmental benefits through a more natural wetting and drying regime. Euston Lakes are located on the northern side of the Murray River, approximately 80 kilometres south east of Mildura near the town of Euston.
 - (b) Upper Murrumbidgee environmental flow enhancement sub-project (\$0.5 million) will investigate the feasibility of raising the operational flow limit at Gundagai to allow improved environmental outcomes for mid-river wetlands (Wagga Wagga to Hay, NSW). The investigation will include the potential for this to provide environmental water efficiencies and will identify the need for complementary actions such as the purchase of easements.
 - (c) Nimmie-Caira System Enhanced Environmental Water Delivery Sub-project (\$0.2 million) will investigate the potential to enhance environmental water delivery to key ecological assets in the Lower Murrumbidgee floodplain and potentially downstream in the Murray Valley. The investigations will consider the potential to provide both significant environmental benefit and reduce environmental water requirements through changed land use and the use of existing or enhanced infrastructure to better deliver environmental water.
 - (d) Piping Irrigation Demands sub-project (\$0.15 million) will undertake pre-feasibility investigations of the potential for water efficiency gains from developing pipelines to supply irrigation users in close vicinity to NSW State Water dams. The investigation will include consideration of the potential to deliver better and more water-efficient environmental outcomes from returning to more variable flow patterns in rivers and streams.
 - (e) Burrendong Dam sub-project (\$0.2 million) environmental flow enhancement sub-project will undertake a pre-feasibility study to investigate the potential benefit from enhancing the outlet capacity at Burrendong dam, south east of Wellington, NSW. This may enable the release of higher pulse flows which could lead to environmental benefits such as native fish spawning and recruitment, and potentially the more efficient delivery of environmental water including to the Macquarie Marshes.
 - (f) Southern Macquarie Marshes sub-project (\$0.2 million) environmental flow enhancement sub-project will assess options for more efficient inundation of the South Macquarie Marsh (approximately 50 kilometres north of Warren, NSW). This feasibility assessment will include options for restoring more stable floodplains, streambeds and wetlands.
 - (g) Investigation into efficient delivery of high priority stock and domestic supplies sub-project (\$0.15 million) will undertake pre-feasibility assessments to identify additional water efficiency gains by piping stock and domestic water supply schemes in high priority locations including in the Macquarie, Murray, Murrumbidgee river systems.
 - (h) Modify Weirs enhance floodplain inundation sub-project (\$0.2 million) will undertake a strategic assessment (part feasibility) of some existing weirs along the

Murray River to determine the optimal weir pool height for facilitating more efficient delivery of environmental water onto the floodplain in a range of flow events.

Queensland

2. Assist Queensland to deliver feasibility investigations, including the costs, risks and benefits, of the following environmental works and measures project that has the potential to offset sustainable diversion limits (SDLs);
 - (a) Queensland Murray Darling Basin Environmental Works and Measures project (\$1.0 million) will identify the prospects for environmental works and measures in priority locations for diversion limit reductions such as the Lower Balonne catchment of Queensland. Individual projects will be shortlisted for further development in close consultation with existing community groups and key stakeholders. The proposal also includes development of preliminary costs estimates for priority proposals and development of a program to remediate/retire overland flow diversion works in priority locations.
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South Australia

3. Assist South Australia to deliver feasibility investigations including, the costs, risks and benefits, of the following environmental works and measures sub-projects including their potential to offset sustainable diversion limits (SDLs):
 - (a) Katfish Reach and Pike Implementation (Stage 3) sub-project (\$0.65 million) will assess the feasibility of installing new environmental regulators in the Pike floodplain near Renmark and the Katfish Reach floodplain, south of Berri, South Australia. The aim is to enable broad floodplain inundation with less environmental water than required under a natural flood event. Katfish reach is a demonstration reach for native fish under the Murray Darling Basin Native Fish Strategy.
 - (b) Eastern Mount Lofty Ranges Low Flow Bypasses sub-project (\$0.18 million) will undertake pre-feasibility hydrological modelling to determine the strategic placement of possible low flow bypass devices in dams at locations in the Eastern Mount Lofty Ranges region of South Australia.
 - (c) Proposed sub-project (\$0.17 million) – details being finalised¹.
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Victoria

4. Assist Victoria to deliver feasibility investigations including, the costs, risks and benefits, of the following environmental works and measures sub-projects that have the potential to offset sustainable diversion limits (SDLs):
 - a) Watering the Lindsay Island floodplain sub-project (\$1.1 million) will progress Stage 2 of the Lindsay Island project by revising concept designs and conducting studies, such as salinity, geotechnical and cultural heritage. Stage 2 involves construction of a large weir and eight smaller regulators to improve inundation regimes for over 5000 hectares including large areas of River Red Gum floodplain.
 - b) Watering the Wallpolla Island floodplain sub-project (\$0.1 million) will undertake a review of the existing concept designs for a three kilometre long channel and seven regulating structures proposed to improve inundation regimes of around 1,000 hectares of floodplain, including River Red Gum communities and wetlands, as well as increasing flowing habitat by 50 kilometres. This process may also identify potential additional environmental benefits.

¹ South Australia – a further sub-project to the value of \$0.17 million has been proposed for which details are being finalised.

c) Watering River Red Gum sites along the Murray sub-project (\$0.2 million) will undertake scoping studies and feasibility investigations into using structural works to deliver environmental water to various Victorian sites, between Echuca and the South Australian Border, including in the newly established reserves for the protection of River Red Gums.

d) Watering black box wetlands in Gunbower forest sub-project (\$0.45 million) will undertake concept design of a 50 metre channel to deliver water from the Torrumbarry weir pool to the Gunbower forest; an off take regulator and fishway; and minor earth works to remove man made barriers. These works could potentially inundate over 8,000 hectares of forest, including threatened Black Box woodland and wetlands. The concept design and preliminary studies for the proposed work are already completed

e) Watering the Hattah Lakes - Chalka Creek North sub-project (\$0.15 million) will complete feasibility studies and progress detailed designs of an environmental regulator, upgrade roads and box culverts for Chalka Creek north, approximately 50 kilometres south of Mildura, Victoria. It will investigate the delivery of water to the site via a pump station that is to be constructed under The Living Murray program.
