

Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council Meeting No 1, 12 June, Sydney

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council today held its historic first meeting under the new governance arrangements with all Basin governments united around the opportunity to put the Basin onto a sustainable footing.

The Council comprises the Commonwealth Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator Penny Wong (Chair) and water ministers from Queensland (Hon Stephen Robertson), New South Wales (Hon Phillip Costa), Victoria (Hon Tim Holding), South Australia (Hon Karlene Maywald) and the ACT (Simon Corbell, MLA).

The Ministers recognised that extreme drought conditions are continuing to severely impact on irrigation farmers, towns and cities and rivers and wetlands across the Murray-Darling Basin.

They expressed deep concern for all people and communities throughout the Basin who are suffering as result of this extended drought and the emerging impacts of climate change.

Ministers welcomed today's announcement of appointments to the new Basin Community Committee. The members and chair, who will play a crucial advisory role in the development of the Basin Plan, bring a comprehensive mix of skills and knowledge on irrigated agriculture, Basin communities, Indigenous matters, environmental management and water use.

Ministers extended their congratulations to all members of the new Basin Community Committee and wished them well in the start of their significant role at their first meeting in July.

Ministers acknowledged the importance of developing the new Basin Plan which will, for the first time, ensure sustainable levels of diversions from rivers and aquifers across the whole Basin.

They stressed that the Plan will be based on rigorous scientific principles and will require a comprehensive process of community consultation and input, and socio-economic assessment.

Ministers welcomed yesterday's release of the Basin Plan Concept Statement as the first step in this process. When the Plan is finalised in 2011 and after consultation with Basin State Ministers, the Authority will provide the Plan to the Commonwealth Minister for final decision. Once adopted, the Plan and its new sustainable diversion limits will be put in place once existing state water plans expire.

The key challenge of the Basin Plan is to put the future of the Basin, its communities, and its environmental values on a sustainable footing and that requires some tough decisions.

The Ministers were united in the view that the process of adjusting to the new, lower sustainable diversion limits expected in the new Basin Plan should start now and that the combination of investments in irrigation efficiency and water purchase are key to this adjustment process.

Ministers agreed the next meeting would be held in Brisbane in November.

Media contact: MDBA, Sam Leone, phone (02) 6279 0141