Murray-Darling Basin Water Ministers meet in Adelaide

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council met in Adelaide today. Ministers affirmed their support for the Murray-Darling Basin reforms and welcomed progress in the development of the draft Basin Plan, with the Plan to be finalised in early 2012.

Ministers agreed to accelerate funding for priority water infrastructure projects, to progress environmental works and measures and to improve industry confidence in water brokers.

Ministers noted considerable progress in development of the draft Basin Plan by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. The Hon Craig Knowles, Chair of the Authority, informed members of his consultations with state governments, industry and communities on key elements of the Basin Plan. The release date for the draft Basin Plan will allow for appropriate consideration of the findings of the House of Representatives Committee Inquiry chaired by Mr Tony Windsor, MP.

Ministers welcomed a process that included consideration of environmental, economic and social issues in the development of the Basin Plan, and discussed the importance of providing sufficient time for communities and industry to adjust to the sustainable diversion limits. Ministers requested that the Authority consider aligning the commencement dates in all states to 2019.

Ministers reiterated their view that the Plan must be evidence-based and underpinned by best available science.

In implementing the Basin Plan through an adaptive management approach, ministers agreed that each jurisdiction has a role to play in supporting local communities to contribute their experience, knowledge and innovative local practices.

Ministers expressed frustration at the pace of implementing infrastructure projects and agreed to explore the development of an outcomes-based framework to streamline the use of infrastructure funds. Ministers tasked officials to report back by the end of June with recommended mechanisms to accelerate on-ground investment in water saving infrastructure, and deliver best possible value from the $3.2 billion that the Commonwealth has committed to priority State projects. Water savings from such projects will contribute to ‘bridging the gap’ under the forthcoming Basin Plan.

The Commonwealth had previously committed $1.103 billion in Victoria, $1.358 billion in NSW, $530 million in SA, $160 million in Queensland and $85 million in the ACT for water infrastructure projects. Of these funds, projects totaling $2.3 billion have already been approved by the Commonwealth.

Minister Burke confirmed that all of this funding remains available within the respective states.

Ministers acknowledged the Commonwealth’s willingness to help state governments and community groups investigate potential environmental works and measures. These are projects with potential to deliver more water-efficient environmental outcomes for the Basin’s rivers and wetlands, thereby reducing the need to recover water from consumptive users.

The Commonwealth has committed a further $10 million towards the cost of investigating environmental works and measures projects, comprising $6 million for sixteen state government proposals and $4 million for a state-led process to assist the development of community-based proposals. Further details of arrangements for community-based projects will be announced separately by each state following the release of the Draft Basin Plan.

Ministers acknowledged concerns raised by stakeholders about the potential risks that may arise with the use of water brokers. Ministers noted options being explored to address these concerns, and agreed to undertake further work on ways of enhancing user confidence in our water markets.
Ministers endorsed the work of the Authority to articulate Indigenous cultural values associated with rivers and wetlands, and propose a framework for their incorporation into state water plans.

Other outcomes from the meeting were the approval of the 2011-12 corporate plan for the Authority, a progress update on The Living Murray initiative, and release of a report into the scale and extent of acid sulfate soils in the southern Basin.

Ministers noted improved conditions across the Basin. Rainfall across the entire Basin between 1 June 2010 and 30 April 2011 has been very much above average, with the highest rainfall on record occurring in the southern half of the Basin and in parts of southern Queensland. Although the total inflow is within the range seen over the past 118 years, the pattern of inflows has been very unusual, with modest inflows in winter/spring, and summer inflows more than double the previous highest on record.

Notwithstanding the damage to communities and industries due to the widespread flooding over the past year, the water reserves of the Basin have been replenished. As a result, water availability for irrigators over the coming water year will be high.

The Council recorded its appreciation for Rob Freeman’s service as Chief Executive of the Authority since its establishment in 2008, and his significant contribution to water reform and natural resource management in this role and his earlier career.

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