2014 – a big year ahead

This year will be busy for the Murray–Darling Basin Authority in the northern Basin, as projects in the northern Basin work program continue to be scoped and implemented.

We will also continue to work with community groups in refining and implementing the northern Basin work program. Meetings are planned for early in the year to discuss current and future projects, including the Science Review Project and the proposed approach to social and economic assessments, which will be used to inform the northern Basin review.

Northern Basin Advisory Committee meetings

Last meeting
26–27 November 2013, Canberra, ACT.

Next meetings
10–11 February 2014, Narrabri, NSW.
30 April & 1 May 2014, Goondiwindi, Qld.

Message from Mal Peters, Advisory Committee Chair

The Northern Basin Advisory Committee was established to provide advice to the MDBA on the implementation of the Basin Plan, and development of a northern Basin work program. In the last year, we have held numerous meetings and learnt people’s concerns firsthand. This has allowed the Committee to give evidence based advice to the MDBA, so that community views are understood when implementing the Basin Plan.

It was very pleasing to see Senator Simon Birmingham, the new Australian Government Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Environment with direct responsibility for water, visit the northern Basin to listen to community views. He also delivered a clear message – “the Basin Plan will be implemented on time and in full”. A number of Committee members attended meetings organised by Senator Birmingham.

The committee is concerned to learn of anxiety in the Bourke community, as a result of issues aside from the Basin Plan. The Committee wants to reassure the community that the government is aware of the range of issues, and it will try to deliver the community’s feedback to the appropriate people.

OUR VISION: To inform and influence the implementation of the Basin Plan in the northern Basin to achieve maintenance and enhancement of the environment and healthy communities.
At the request of the Northern Irrigators Alliance, a briefing session was held with MDBA staff to answer questions on a number of technical matters as well as aspects of the northern Basin work program. As key representatives of an important sector in the northern Basin, it is important that their concerns are heard.

The Committee has endorsed the Northern Basin Work Program, and we want to see some real progress in what will be a challenging year, to achieve acceptable results for both the communities and the environment.

The Committee is committed to working with northern Basin communities and on their behalf I hope 2014 is a healthy and rewarding year for all those people who have chosen to live in this beautiful part of Australia.

On the evening of 26 November 2013, the committee had the opportunity to see some of the good work MDBA is carrying out in their education program, including potential collaborations with the National Museum of Australia. Using broadband technology, there is the potential to enable communities to share information and develop collaborative networks with other regional centres. It also could provide more opportunities for communities to share ideas about the challenges facing them in the future.

The education team is looking forward to the release of the 2014 Basin Champions program – an Australian Curriculum-aligned videoconference program targeted at school students and welcomes participation from videoconference-enabled Northern Basin school communities.

For more information about the Basin Champions program and other education initiatives, email education@mdba.gov.au
Senator Birmingham tours the Northern Basin

Senator Simon Birmingham, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment, undertook a three day tour during October 2013, meeting with community representatives in Moree (21 October), St George and Goondiwindi (22 October), Weilmoringle and Narromine (23 October).

The Senator was keen to discuss issues around Basin Plan implementation. He heard local representatives’ views on many issues including localism, communication, the Menindee Lakes, Basin Plan integration with natural resource management programs, flows to the Lower Balonne floodplain and the amount of water recovered to date. The northern Basin review was a common theme for discussion at all meetings.

Senator Birmingham was accompanied on his tour by David Parker and Richard McLoughlin from the Department of Environment and Simon Banks from the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office. Several members of the Northern Basin Advisory Committee had the opportunity to meet with Senator Birmingham during his tour.

And some key announcements from Senator Birmingham...

Late last year, Senator Birmingham and NSW Minister for Primary Industries, Katrina Hodgkinson, announced a funding agreement to progress a water savings project at the Menindee Lakes. The project will help: maintain the water supply to downstream users; improve drought supply to Broken Hill; and maintain the environmental values of the Lakes. The funding agreement provides up to $800,000 for the NSW government to undertake project planning, stakeholder consultation and detailed design work for a project to reduce evaporation at the Lakes by 80 gigalitres.

In November 2013, Senator Birmingham also met with state and territory ministers in Canberra at the Murray–Darling Basin Ministerial Council meeting.

Draft Basin Plan Evaluation Framework

The Advisory Committee considered MDBA’s briefing on the draft Basin Plan Evaluation Framework, which sets out how the MDBA will evaluate the effectiveness...
of the plan across economic, social and environmental considerations. This is a high level framework designed to meet the statutory requirements of the Water Act and Basin Plan. It was endorsed by the Advisory Committee, which will now concentrate on monitoring and evaluation at the catchment level.

The Committee also noted that as the Basin Plan is phased in over time (2012-2019), evaluation and reporting obligations will be phased in as activities start and outcomes are seen. MDBA will report annually on the effectiveness of the Basin Plan.

The Advisory Committee’s Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group will meet in early 2014. The aim is to clarify arrangements for monitoring and evaluation in northern Basin catchments and the role of local reporting monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement as determined by catchment-level State water plans.

**An update on the social and economic monitoring and evaluation**

Since June 2013, the MDBA has held more than 75 meetings with communities and other stakeholders, to discuss our approach to monitoring and evaluating the social and economic impacts of the Basin Plan.

In the northern Basin, we have met with people in Moree, Narrabri, Warren, Dirranbandi, Goondiwindi, St George and Bourke. The Advisory Committee has also provided useful guidance and knowledge.

Discussions with communities have helped to develop a set of indicators that we can use to monitor and evaluate the social and economic impacts and outcomes of the Basin Plan, over time. Our conversations with communities have also provided useful information about local sources of data.

Taking into account feedback from communities and other experts, we are developing a document that sets out our proposed approach to monitoring and evaluation. This draft document will be distributed in February for comment, prior to finalising our approach around March.

**Lifeblood Alliance**

The Advisory Committee is always interested in hearing the views of people and organisations about the Murray-Darling Basin and the Basin Plan. At the November meeting, Dr Arlene Harriss-Buchan and Emma Carmody spoke about the objectives of the Lifeblood Alliance and current basin related issues.

The Lifeblood Alliance is an alliance of 22 diverse organisations including environmental groups such as the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Environmental Farmers Network and the Australian Floodplain Association. Their objective is to secure a healthy future for the Murray-Darling Basin that supports a full range of environmental values, industries and communities.

Issues highlighted at the meeting included the Northern Basin Science Review, transfer (shepherding) of environmental water downstream, water management rules and the impact from coal mining and coal seam gas.

The Committee and the Lifeblood Alliance representatives agreed to push for the Commonwealth and state government’s consideration for the option of temporary trading for environmental water, as a means of more effectively achieving the Basin Plan environmental outcomes.

**Figure 5: Pillicawarrina area, Macquarie Marshes, March 2012**

*Photo: Janna Randell, MDBA*
Technical briefing arranged for Northern Irrigators Alliance

As a result of the Advisory Committee becoming aware of specific technical questions from northern valley irrigators about the Basin Plan, the Committee arranged a technical briefing by MDBA staff in Canberra on 10 December 2013.

The briefing was attended by members of the Northern Irrigators Alliance. The Alliance comprises representatives from Border Rivers Food & Fibre, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, Namoi Water, Macquarie River Food & Fibre and Cotton Australia. Tom Chesson from the National Irrigators Council also attended.

The briefing included detailed explanations on Basin Plan modelling, conversion factors and environmental water requirements used for Sustainable Diversion Limits.

Attendees agreed that the briefing was a useful basis for further consultations on the Northern Basin review. MDBA acknowledges the Northern Irrigators Alliance is a peak body for water users in the north and will continue to work closely with them on issues of concern to them.

If there are other community groups or individuals who have specific questions they would like answered, please talk to an Advisory Committee member or make contact through the contact details at the end of this newsletter.

Macquarie Marshes provides flow-on benefits to the Barwon–Darling system

The Macquarie Marshes is often incorrectly called a terminal wetland system. In fact, flows from the Macquarie valley connect to the Barwon–Darling system through the:

- Macquarie River downstream of the marshes
- Bogan River and the Marra Creek through a system of north-west flowing distributary streams
- Ginghet channel in major floods

Environmental water deliveries to the marshes between mid-July and early November 2013 contributed an estimated five gigalitres through the lower Macquarie to the Barwon–Darling.

The volumes were small as a consequence of the prevailing dry conditions and the relatively small scale of environmental watering in the Marshes, however, the ecological importance of the connection between the two rivers is considered significant, with the linkages providing opportunities for native fish to move between the Barwon–Darling and Macquarie systems.

The link between the two systems generates further benefits for rural communities. Former General Manager of Bourke Shire and current Advisory Committee member, Geoff Wise has been told that Bourke township did not need to introduce water restrictions during the spring-early summer of 2013 because the small outflows of environmental water from the Macquarie Marshes, which maintained a small flow in the Darling River across the Bourke weir.

The Macquarie water carries much less silt and is often visibly clearer, meaning water treatment at Bourke costs less.

(The above contribution is from Debbie Love, NSW Office of Environment & Heritage, Dubbo)
The Committee agreed on further refinements to the Northern Basin Work Program. It broadly sets out projects and activities across six outcome areas.

The work program will be updated as other issues and priorities arise. The Committee will continue to talk to northern Basin people about what they would like the work program to cover.

The work program includes key projects that relate to the Northern Basin Review. Projects under the environmental science, social and economic, and water recovery outcome areas will be strongly linked to each other to ensure an integrated approach to further research and investigation.

MDBA’s northern Basin science review project update

At their November meeting the Committee discussed progress by the science panel. This panel has been engaged to carry out a review of the work on the environmental basis for some of the northern Basin surface water Sustainable Diversion Limits.

The project steering committee, that comprises representatives from state agencies and the Advisory Committee, has provided feedback on the review findings. The project has been delayed while further work is done by the science panel with input from the steering committee on the project recommendations.

The project recommendations will provide an important guide to the work to be done over the next two years to improve the basis for the Condamine-Balonne and Barwon-Darling environmental water requirements.

MDBA will seek feedback on the review findings from the northern Basin community before confirming any projects to be undertaken.
Figure 8: Map of the Murray-Darling Basin showing the extent of coverage of the LiDAR project

**LiDAR project**

One of the projects underway in the northern Basin is the LiDAR (Light detection and ranging) project. The work is being undertaken by Geoscience Australia and involves a major aerial survey across the Murray–Darling Basin.

Covering 68,500 square kilometres, from St George to Wentworth and east to Moree, low flying planes capture imagery that will be turned into high resolution elevation data. This elevation data will assist in the development of a more accurate representation of the landscape and improve understanding of flood behaviour across the Basin.

The results are expected by July 2014 and the information will be publicly available. The information will not only be useful to the northern Basin work program, but also to local councils, engineers, local land services, natural resource management organisations and researchers with an interest in land and water management.
NBAC: Next meeting in Narrabri

The agenda for the next meeting in Narrabri on 10-11 February 2014, will include updates and discussion on northern Basin work program projects, including consideration of recommendations from the science review project for further research and investigation.

More information

More information on the Northern Basin Advisory Committee can be found on the MDBA website.

For more information on MDBA’s northern Basin program, email Frank Walker, Director, Northern Basin at frank.walker@mdba.gov.au or phone 07 4637 8847.