March 2014

Message from the Northern Basin Advisory Committee Chair

Members of the Northern Basin Advisory Committee spent considerable time at our February meeting in Narrabri, discussing the debilitating impacts that the drought is having on people in the northern Basin. Members are experiencing the drought first hand on their farms and in their homes and it is the issue of major importance in discussion with communities. We have made sure the messages have gone back to not only the MDBA but both State and Federal Governments.

People have told the committee they are concerned how drought impacts not only their farms, towns and businesses, but also the security of and access to water and we are concerned for the many affected people as the drought continues. The announcement by the Prime Minister that he recognises the importance of farmers and rural communities is a welcome step, and the assistance packages will help people cope. Drought and other adverse conditions that mother-nature throws at us will continue to be factored into our thinking.

We still have a lot to learn about the northern Basin and there is a northern Basin review underway that includes social, economic and environmental scenarios for several catchments. This review will inform the review of the Basin Plan in 2015. The Committee continues to strongly advocate a blend of science, local knowledge and experience to ensure we get the best possible results, so we have been encouraging MDBA to visit northern Basin communities to discuss the science review report and its findings and draw on their advice as the work program proceeds.

Those meetings will be held in a few weeks and details for the upcoming April visits are in the newsletter.

The Committee has also asked the MDBA to produce a series of easy to read and informative fact sheets about catchments in the northern Basin. The first of these Spotlight on Barwon-Darling gives a snapshot of the Barwon-Darling region, talks about what we are trying to do and what’s been done so far, and describes what is left to do. Watch out for it on the MDBA website soon.

Last but not least, the Basin Watering Strategy is a hot topic with a discussion document due for release in August and the final strategy to be published in November. The meetings in April will provide more detail and opportunity to help shape the development of the Strategy.

Mal Peters
Northern Basin Advisory Committee Chair
**Floodplain harvesting briefing**

At its recent meeting in Narrabri, the Committee was briefed on the floodplain harvesting of water. Floodplain harvesting refers to the capture and use of water flowing across a floodplain that is not covered by a specific extraction licence or agreement.

The NSW Office of Water briefing allowed us to better understand the implications of the NSW policy to Basin water reform.

Under NSW’s policy, the amount of floodwater available for extraction will be capped and shared among existing water users. Approval is required from the NSW Office of Water before floodwater can be taken and used, however, it is noted that there will be no growth in overall extractions on a valley-wide basis.

The NSW Office of Water policy can be found at its [web site](#).

**Temporary water trade in the Gwydir valley**

The sale of 10 gigalitres of water by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) in the Gwydir Valley has now been completed.

Environmental conditions in the Gwydir guided the decision to sell a small portion of the annual allocation.

MDBA’s Chair, Craig Knowles welcomed the news and said "We have been calling for the temporary trade of environmental water for at least the past two years, in line with the Commonwealth Water Act, and as part of our work on the Murray–Darling Basin Plan.

"I am delighted that the CEWH has decided to go down this path.

"Far from this being a retrograde step for the environment, temporary trade means that water for the environment can be fully valued and take its place for the first time in Australia’s history alongside other classes of water.

"Environmental water must take its place in a market-based system in order to extract the highest and best environmental benefits.

"This move by the CEWH demonstrates a further maturing of water management in Australia and, importantly, gives people more confidence to invest in the water market with increased certainty around the CEWH’s activities."

The Northern Basin Advisory Committee also welcomes this landmark decision as a positive step that endorses the Committees view to allow appropriate temporary water trading in the northern Basin.

To read more about the sale, visit the [Trading Outcomes](#) page on the CEWH’s [website](#).
Science and local knowledge - contributors to Basin management

The review of the science that contributes to the development of surface water Sustainable Diversion Limits is nearing completion. Stakeholder meetings are now being planned for the northern Basin in the next couple of months to consider its findings. We’ll also talk about the overall work program through to the end of 2015. Involving the northern Basin community to benefit from their knowledge and experience will also be discussed.

The schedule for meetings with northern Basin communities during April is:

- 14, 15 and 16 April – Dirrinbandi, Narrabri and Warren
- 29 April – Goondiwindi (before the Committee’s meeting on 30 April/1 May)
- A meeting of the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations is being planned for late April/early May

Please contact MDBA for details of the meetings – email: engagement@mdba.gov.au or call 1800 230 067.

There are several collaborative projects relevant to the science review. One of the projects nearing completion is the mapping of the condition and extent of floodplain vegetation across all the major river systems of the Basin.

Another project (discussed in our previous newsletter) is the collection of Digital Elevation data. The information collected will allow MDBA to progressively develop floodplain inundation models for key floodplain systems in the northern Basin.

All of these projects rely on a combination of science, local knowledge and cultural considerations. The compilation of this information and some flexibility through an adaptive framework built into the Basin Plan will deliver the best outcomes in the management of the Basin.

Cultural flows

Aboriginal people from across the Basin require cultural flows to help sustain their on-going cultural practices and relationship with their traditional lands. But what are cultural flows?

Cultural flows are water of a sufficient and adequate quantity and quality to improve the spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic conditions for aboriginal people.

The Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) work with MDBA in the northern Basin (as does its southern Basin counterpart, the Murray–Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations – MILDRIN) to provide an Aboriginal perspective on natural resource management and cultural issues in the Basin.

Information gleaned from the cultural flows research project will assist in guiding how and where cultural water may be used and the subsequent monitoring of its use.

More information about the involvement and contribution of aboriginal people in the management of the Basin is on our web site.

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 call 07 4637 8847.