

Murray-Darling Ministerial Council Meeting No 2

Despite recent rain and a welcome boost to water allocations for farmers in the southern Murray-Darling Basin, the water resource outlook for the whole Basin remains poor.

That's the central message delivered to Commonwealth and State Basin water ministers meeting in Brisbane today; the second meeting of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council to be held under the new Basin governance arrangements.

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council comprises the Commonwealth Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator the Hon. 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).

Presenting its latest Drought Update, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) told ministers that stream flows and storage levels remain low across most of the Murray-Darling Basin. Key points from the Drought Update are as follows:

- While the upper tributaries of the Murray and some areas in South Australia received average, or slightly above average rainfall, the northern Basin has been particularly dry and the Darling River has again stopped flowing.
- As a result of the recent rain in the south, Murray system inflows for the first five months of the 2009-10 water year were 2,200 GL - significantly better than for the same period during each of the last three years, but well below the June to October long term average of 6,390 GL.
- In the River Murray, the current 2009/10 water year is tracking as the 17th driest in 118 years of records.
- Water storages remain low for this time of year with MDBA River Murray active (useable) storage at the end of October at 2,570 GL or 30% of capacity, well below the October long term average of 6,530 GL.
- Total public storage across the entire Basin also remains low, at only 28 % of capacity (6,450 GL compared to a capacity of 22,600 GL).

Ministers heard from the Bureau of Meteorology that the rainfall outlook for the next three months is for drier than normal conditions for the northern Basin and fairly average conditions for the southern Basin.

The drier conditions in the northern Basin are associated with an El Niño event which is now clearly evident across the Pacific Ocean, and is expected to persist well into next year.

Without a very significant improvement in inflows during autumn, water storages are once again expected to fall to very low levels by the start of the next water year in June 2010.

Ministers were concerned that the water outlook remains grave for irrigators and the environment alike. They expressed concern for those farmers, communities and industries bearing the brunt of this record drought, unprecedented over more than a century of records.

Ministers reached agreement, in-principle, to maintain funding in real terms for the Authority's NRM and River Operations programs through to 2014-15, subject to funding approval by the Basin governments, and, a review of program priorities and efficiency.

Ministers approved up to \$24.5m over four years to maintain the Murray Mouth. In light of the likelihood of continuing low flows for the time being at least, this work will guard against the build-up of sand and prevent the Mouth from closing.

Ministers noted the NSW Government response to the cumulative breach of the Barwon Darling cap, and resolved to discuss this matter further at the next meeting. Ministers also urged the NSW Government to finalise the Barwon Darling Water Sharing Plan, and submit a cap proposal for its Border Rivers with Queensland.

The Murray Darling Basin Authority informed the Council of progress towards the development of the Basin Plan for the integrated and sustainable management of the Basin's surface and ground water resources.

Ministers commended the progress being made by the Authority on the Basin Plan, and welcomed the Authority's release this week of two major documents to boost public discussion and feedback on development of the Basin Plan. The documents, both available at www.mdba.gov.au, are:

- a Basin socio-economic context report; and
- a discussion paper on developing sustainable diversion limits for the Basin.

Ministers noted that Basin jurisdictions have commenced a comprehensive review of the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement. The review will examine options for improving the management of water resources in the Basin, in particular the operation of the River Murray System, to better meet the challenges of a drier future. Ministers noted that the review would not impact on the timing and development of the Basin Plan by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. Review recommendations are likely to be ready for Ministers' consideration by early 2011.

In other matters, the Ministers:

- welcomed the advice that 97 per cent of The Living Murray program's water recovery target would be reached, with the current suite of projects delivering a total of 485 GL in average annual additional flows to the Murray; and
- noted an update from South Australia on the environmental problems facing the Lower Lakes and Coorong..

Ministers agreed to meet early next year.

A copy of the latest Murray-Darling Basin Authority's Drought Update is available at www.mdba.gov.au/media_centre/drought_updates.

Ministers acknowledged the attendance of the Chair of the Basin Community Committee, Ms Joan Burns.

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