

## Murray-Darling Basin water ministers meet in Albury

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council met in Albury today.

Those attending included the Chair, the Hon Tony Burke MP (Commonwealth); the Hon Phillip Costa (New South Wales); the Hon Peter Walsh (Victoria); the Hon Paul Caica (South Australia); the Hon Stephen Robertson (Queensland, via teleconference) and ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope.

Ministers reiterated the importance of delivering reform in the Murray-Darling Basin to secure the healthy and sustainable rivers fundamental for strong communities and food production. They stressed this reform would need to be delivered through a high level of engagement between the Commonwealth and state governments, and with communities.

Ministers have heard loud and clear the concerns of Basin communities about the guide to the proposed Basin Plan and the need for greater community involvement in the preparation of the proposed Plan. Ministers agreed to support a new process for the Basin Plan going forward that will more fully involve state governments and Basin communities.

The Basin Plan will need to properly take into account social and economic factors, including the needs of urban centres that rely on the Basin. Ministers encouraged the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to release the proposed Basin Plan according to a timetable that allows it to take into account the findings of the House of Representatives Committee inquiry chaired by Mr Tony Windsor, MP. This schedule will facilitate appropriate consideration of socio-economic impacts, and greater engagement of states and communities in the development of the proposed Basin Plan.

Ministers further called for the scientific basis and environmental benefits of the proposed Basin Plan to be presented fully and clearly and in a way that allows for proper external analysis and scrutiny, and community engagement.

Ministers committed to implement these processes consistent with the statutory framework established by the Water Act. Ministers further stressed that greater certainty should be provided for Basin communities and called on the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to progress its work so that the Basin Plan can be presented to the Commonwealth Parliament in early 2012.

Ministers met with the Basin Community Committee (BCC) and discussed the importance of the next twelve months in the development of the Basin Plan, particularly the need to improve community engagement. Ministers and the BCC noted the importance of implementing infrastructure investments under the Australian Government's Water for the Future program in improving water use efficiency, supporting productivity and returning water to the environment. They also noted the importance of considering Indigenous interests in water in the Basin and the importance of effective coordination between governments.

Ministers noted that the Murray-Darling Basin has recorded its wettest spring on record, with an average of 235.5mm compared to the previous record of 227.9mm in 1917. As we move into summer the Basin has experienced widespread flooding across many rivers. Ministers acknowledge that families and communities impacted by flooding have endured disruption and

suffered damage. At the same time the substantial inflows across the Basin have reset the water systems. It is likely there will be a continuous flow to the sea for most, if not all, of the period until June 2011. The 2011-12 water year will begin with the best start seen for many years. Ministers also acknowledged that these improvements do not diminish the need for the long term reforms agreed in the 2008 Intergovernmental Agreement on the Murray-Darling Basin, centred on the development and implementation of the Basin Plan.

Ends.

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