

## Murray–Darling Basin water ministers meet in Melbourne

29 May 2015

The Murray–Darling Basin Ministerial Council met in Melbourne today to consider basin water management and reform matters and to consider progress on Basin Plan implementation.

The council welcomed the Hon. Bob Baldwin (Commonwealth) to his role as Ministerial Council chair, new ministers to the council, the Hon. Niall Blair MP (NSW), the Hon. Lisa Neville MP (Victoria), the Hon. Anthony Lynham (Queensland), as well as existing members the Hon. Ian Hunter (South Australia) and Mr Simon Corbell MLA (ACT).

Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) chair Neil Andrew provided the council with an update on Basin Plan implementation, acknowledging the milestones and achievements to date of all Commonwealth and state agencies. Ministers reaffirmed their governments' commitments to work cooperatively to deliver the environmental outcomes of the Basin Plan while minimising adverse effects on basin communities and industries.

Ministers acknowledged this year's centenary of the River Murray Waters Agreement, which gave birth to the cooperative sharing arrangements between basin governments that continue today.

The Ministerial Council emphasised the importance of implementing the sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism and reiterated the need for it to be based on robust science. Ministers also agreed to commission a stocktake of progress on the development of the government projects to be considered in the adjustment process to get the best possible environmental, social and economic outcomes. Ministers also noted the ongoing research and investigation by jurisdictions and the MDBA into river constraints, which will be considered in the adjustment process, and the merits of exploring further opportunities to derive multiple benefits from these projects. Ministers instructed their officials to drive the adjustment process as hard and as fast as possible. Ministers agreed to meet again in August to consider the outcome of the stocktake and review progress. Ministers requested that the public release by the MDBA of the trial report of the adjustment method take place in August.

Ministers initiated a process for the coming year to increase confidence around the key planning assumptions states will use to develop their water resource plans under the Basin Plan. The council agreed each basin state would work with the MDBA to settle planning assumptions for each valley by mid-2016, ahead of the sustainable diversion limits taking effect in July 2019. Timely completion of this work will help to settle the Australian Government's remaining water recovery task.

An update on progress of the Northern Basin Review was provided to ministers, with a focus on the work to date on the hydrological modelling, social-economic assessments, environmental science projects and consultation. It was agreed the MDBA would provide a further update and some preliminary results for ministers to consider at the end-of-year ministerial council meeting. Ministers also requested that they receive a briefing from the Northern Basin Advisory Committee chair at that time. The MDBA will be considering the outcomes of the review in early 2016 with final decisions expected by mid-2016.

The council approved the 2015–16 budget for the Murray–Darling Basin joint programs, which are undertaken by the MDBA on behalf of all basin governments. Ministers noted the significant cost savings and efficiencies achieved over the past three years across all joint programs. They also noted the importance of making ongoing efficiency improvements to achieve sustainable multi-year funding arrangements.

The council discussed the work to date on the three groundwater reviews required under the Basin Plan—two in NSW and one in Victoria. It was agreed that all basin governments would work with the MDBA in regard to progressing any proposed amendments arising from the expert review panel recommendations, including new management conditions to be implemented and a change to the groundwater compliance methodology that would apply basin-wide.

Ministers received an update on the current water resource availability for the River Murray system, noting that the Bureau of Meteorology has advised the tropical Pacific is in the early stages of El Niño. While the coming season's rainfall and inflows remain uncertain, if 2015–2016 is a very dry year, then River Murray water storages could be expected to be drawn to levels well below average, as experienced in 2003 and 2007. It was noted that under such conditions, low security entitlement holders would be most affected.

The council noted the introduction of the Water Amendment Bill 2015 into the Commonwealth Parliament this week. This is a Bill to amend the Water Act 2007 to give effect to the commitment to limit surface water purchases to 1500 gigalitres, and to provide for greater flexibility with efficiency measures by also allowing projects that recover water through works to improve water use efficiency off-farm. The council noted the Commonwealth's commitment to continue to work with basin governments to resolve outstanding issues.

The next Ministerial Council will be held in Sydney in November 2015.

Ends

For further information, contact MDBA media: (02) 6279 0141