

COMMUNIQUE

23-24 October 2018

Advisory Committee for Science, Economics and Environmental Sciences

At its meeting on 23-24 October 2018 in Canberra, the Advisory Committee for Science, Economics and Environmental Sciences (ACSEES) discussed its role in providing the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) with robust and independent advice to support the effective implementation of the Basin Plan. The additional skills and expertise brought onto the Committee will strengthen its capacity to fulfil its role.

The newly appointed chair, Professor Rob Vertessy welcomed the opportunity to serve alongside three new members—Professors Roger Stone, Sue Jackson and Nick Bond—and ongoing members Professors David James, Poh-Ling Tan, and Michael Stewardson. Professor Vertessy noted the value of members' complementary skills and experience in different fields and different parts of the Basin.

Professor Vertessy led discussions on the updated role, operations and expectations for the Committee in the coming year in the context of the MDBA's work priorities identified in a briefing by the MDBA staff.

Professor Vertessy emphasised the importance of utilising the Committee's expertise and experience to provide independent strategic and technical advice. He welcomed the strong and effective working arrangements with the MDBA to ensure ACSEES can support best practice implementation of the Basin Plan. That includes finding ways to increase the strength and visibility of the science behind the Basin Plan and water management in the Basin.

Members noted the recent changes in the structure of the MDBA and commended the increased stature and greater focus accorded to the science, knowledge and information functions of the organization.

The Committee agreed on five priorities for the coming year: the integrity of the SDL accounts used for reporting and compliance, hydrological issues such as return flows, development of a comprehensive MDBA climate change forward work plan, the approach to Basin Plan evaluation, and the transparency of MDBA decision making.

Professor Michael Stewardson provided a briefing on the independent technical review by the University of Melbourne on the effects of irrigation efficiency and potential growth in groundwater use on return flows to the rivers. This important piece of work was supported by the successful workshop hosted by Professor Stewardson, attended by 18 leading hydrologists. It was agreed that this was a good example of the type of role ACSEES can play to ensure future research or analysis is

technically sound and considers all of the relevant issues. ACSEES resolved to undertake regular assessments of emerging issues with technical and analytical dimensions so they could make proactive contributions to the work of the MDBA to address these issues.

A briefing was provided by the MDBA on the technical workshop held in June on the Sustainable Diversion Limit adjustment mechanism. Members were updated on matters relating to the MDBA's role in constraints projects, the Menindee Lakes project and capacity limits in the River Murray system. Members heard the MDBA will be doing an annual progress report on state government delivery of the SDL projects and other mechanisms being considered to build understanding of governments' work to 2024 when the projects need to be completed. ACSEES agreed to consider what role the Committee might have in building the technical community's participation. ACSEES agreed they may have a future role to provide technical input and review of the approach to reconciliation.

ACSEES welcomed the MDBA initiative to prepare a forward work program looking at climate change, and its implications for water management in the Murray–Darling Basin. The Committee members encouraged the MDBA to take stock of the considerable work being done in different jurisdictions and other fields to identify the analytical capacity most suited to water management issues in the Basin. They also strongly advocated for collaboration with the scientific community to help address priority knowledge needs and to build the capacity needed to inform future evaluations and reviews. It was agreed ACSEES would participate in a workshop as part of a future meeting to further progress this work.

Members received a presentation on the Basin Plan evaluation that the MDBA will deliver in 2020 and 2026 in accordance with Basin Plan requirements. Members encouraged the MDBA to explore opportunities for inducting specialist expertise to contribute to this activity. Specifically, they advocated for engaging eminent thinkers in the social, economic and environmental domains, capable of quickly defining appropriate evaluation criteria for each domain and methods to measure them.

Members received a presentation on the MDBA communications strategy and commended the MDBA communications team for the vigour, skill and effectiveness of their efforts, noting in particular the regional deployment of staff.

The Committee agreed to meet twice a year and to provide advice to the MDBA on specific areas throughout the year.

More information about ACSEES is available on the MDBA website at www.mdba.gov.au/about-us/governance/advisory-committee-social-economic-environmental-sciences