

COMMUNIQUE

16-17 April 2019

Advisory Committee for Science, Economics and Environmental Sciences

At its meeting on 16-17 April 2019 in Canberra, the Advisory Committee on Social, Economic and Environmental Sciences (ACSEES) emphasised the importance of growing the independent and scientific knowledge base that underpins effective implementation of the Basin Plan.

Members were briefed by the Chief Executive of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), Phillip Glyde, who noted the stresses that communities are feeling in the Basin due to the drought. Mr Glyde addressed the multiple steps underway to effectively deliver the Basin Plan in accordance with legislative requirements, with an increased focus on compliance and enforcement in the next stage of Basin Plan implementation.

The importance of funding an enduring scientific research and development program to support long-term water management in Australia was a consistent theme through the meeting. Members noted that the call from communities, industries and governments for a strong water science research effort is greater than ever. The strength of agreement between contesting sides was also discussed, along with the need to build on commonalities rather than focus effort on areas of dispute.

The Committee discussed the Independent Assessment into the Fish Deaths in the lower Darling during the summer of 2018-19. Professor Rob Vertessy chaired the Australian government-appointed study that also included ACSEES member Professor Nick Bond. An update on the Australian Government's response to the recommendations of the Independent Assessment was provided by Paul Morris of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources. Members welcomed the response, in particular the commitment to further protect low flows and environmental flows in the Barwon–Darling and the announced support for monitoring and research. ACSEES member Professor Sue Jackson was involved in a parallel study on the same topic, organised by the Australian Academy of Science.

ACSEES welcomed the presentation by MDBA officials on work to deliver the upcoming evaluations of Basin Plan progress. Members expressed their concern about the compressed timelines and possible risk to timely delivery of a high value product in 2020. They encouraged fully engaging in-house technical expertise to support the analysis and evaluation process and to fill any knowledge gaps in order to provide the information needed by a robust and comprehensive evaluation in 2026.

A greater level of exposure in the public domain of the MDBA's technical capacity was also recommended to demonstrate the skill and care taken in the work being done by the MDBA.

ACSEES members welcomed a presentation by consultant Dr Rhonda Butcher about the inter-jurisdictional Basin Science Platform, commissioned by the Basin Officials Committee. The platform is intended to enhance coordination and collaboration in delivering robust science to inform effective Basin Plan implementation. ACSEES encouraged the MDBA to take a stronger role in the process, commensurate with the agency's position as coordinator of the Basin Plan.

On day two, ACSEES hosted a climate change workshop to discuss the preparation of a climate change risk assessment for the Basin. The workshop brought together a strong field of experts, including climate specialists from the CSIRO, BoM, ANU and University of Melbourne. Discussions focused on identifying climate change vulnerabilities in the Basin and methods for quantifying them. A follow-up workshop is planned for mid-2019.

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