



Australian Government

Independent Assessment of the 2018-19 fish deaths in the lower Darling

Terms of Reference

The Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources has requested an independent panel assessment of the deaths of fish in the lower Darling River in December 2018 and January 2019. The independent panel will be chaired by Prof Rob Vertessy, University of Melbourne and Chair of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority’s independent Advisory Committee on Social, Economic and Environmental Sciences (ACSEES) and will involve experts in fish ecology and be informed by the investigations being undertaken by New South Wales Department of Fisheries.

The objective of the independent panel’s assessment will be to identify the likely causes of the 2018-19 lower Darling fish deaths and make appropriate recommendations within the operating mandate of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan and Murray–Darling Basin Agreement (Basin Agreement). The review will also help inform the development of the recently announced Native Fish Management and Recovery Strategy.

The independent panel will:

- assess the water management, events, and conditions leading up to the 2018-19 fish deaths to identify likely causes;
- assess the effectiveness of existing fish management responses to manage fish deaths risks currently being experienced in the lower Darling River; and
- provide recommendations to the Minister, MDBA and Murray-Darling Basin Governments on:
 - strategies that could be implemented to prevent similar events in the future, including, monitoring activities to provide for early warnings of heightened risk of fish deaths from drought and flood events;
 - strategies to enhance native fish recovery following fish death incidents in the lower Darling River; and
 - priority actions and investments in the lower Darling under Murray Darling Basin Plan Native Fish Management and Recovery strategy.

In undertaking the assessment the independent panel:

- will engage and seek advice from relevant New South Wales Department of Fisheries scientists, and other experts in relevant fields, including native freshwater fish ecology, water management and water quality;

- assess information available and interviews with State and Federal agency staff and local residents including Aboriginal stakeholders;
- provide a preliminary report and early advice and recommendations to the Minister by 20 February;
- convene a facilitated workshop involving independent reviewers and a broader group of experts to validate the methods used in, and recommendations from, the independent assessment; and
- provide a report to the Minister, Chair of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority Board and the Murray Darling Basin Ministers no later than 31 March.

Both the early advice and the final report of the independent panel will be released publicly.

Background

In late December 2018 and early 2019 a number of fish deaths were reported in the Murray-Darling Basin. The most extensive were multiple fish deaths observed upstream of Weir 32 on the lower Darling River. These fish deaths in the lower Darling River resulted in hundreds of thousands of dead fish observed including iconic species such as Murray cod, silver perch and golden perch, and very high numbers of bony bream, a key component of the aquatic food resource.

Under the Murray Darling Basin Plan and the Basin Agreement a range of strategies and plans are employed for the effective management and operation of the Murray Darling Basin. These include the operational plans for the management of the southern basin, the Water Quality and Salinity Management Plan and the Basin-wide Environmental Watering Strategy.