

MDBA Submission on the Australian Government's Draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to help build long-term drought resilience in Australia's rural industries and communities and welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan.

The Murray–Darling Basin (MDB) covers one million square kilometres of south-eastern Australia, across South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. The MDBA is a key agency responsible for coordinating how the Basin's water resources are managed through the Basin Plan. We hear daily about the impact of the current drought on Basin communities, ecosystems and industries.

The MDBA notes that the Drought Resilience Funding Plan is broader than the MDB, but given the multijurisdictional nature of the Basin, and the system-wide focus of the MDBA's objectives, the MDBA would like to offer some insights.

Strengths of the Draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan

1. Climate change adaptation

Research conducted in partnership with the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology through the MDBA's Climate Change Research Program has indicated that the future of the Basin will likely be hotter and drier, with more frequent extreme events such as drought. In this context, drought preparedness is vital for our communities, ecosystems and industries. The focus of the Funding Plan on long-term drought preparedness and resilience is a strength of the program and will put Australian communities in a better position to meet future challenges.

The MDBA's Climate Change Research Program is currently assessing the expected impacts of climate change on our communities, including First Nations communities, Basin economies and our environment. Early findings are showing that the impacts of climate change will be felt differently across Basin regions, and the MDBA encourages the Australian Government to consider the needs of individual regions in the implementation of the Drought Resilience Funding Plan.

2. Community focus

The MDBA has heard through our Basin Community Committee, our Regional Engagement Officer network and more recently the Independent Socioeconomic Assessment Panel that the drought is most significantly impacting employees and independent contractors who, without a strong asset base, are relocating to places with more opportunities. Consequently, communities are hollowing out, populations in smaller towns are contracting and, as a result, government services are being withdrawn. Community focussed programs are needed to boost Australia's regions.

The Drought Resilience Funding Plan provides the community focused program that communities across the Basin have been seeking to ensure their long-term viability in a changing climate and in rapidly changing rural economies. This focus is vital in empowering communities to take ownership of their future—engaging and empowering individual communities is critical for the success of the program.

Recommendations for inclusion in the Plan's strategic priorities

3. First Nations

There is a clear absence of reference to consideration of First Nations people and the impact of drought on these communities. Consideration and understanding needs to be given to economic, physical, cultural and emotional impacts of the drought on First Nations people, who are more vulnerable than most.

The MDBA supports two peak Aboriginal bodies within the Murray–Darling Basin in relation to water management—these are the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) and the Murray Lower Darling River Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN). NBAN and MLDRIN represent over 40 First Nations within the Basin and are representative of a diverse group of people over a large area. Through our engagement with these organisations and with individual First Nations, we hear directly the devastating impact the drought is having and how disconnected First Nations people are from government decisions and design of policy and programs.

The MDBA supports a process whereby First Nations people are engaged, can contribute and co-design targeted programs that are appropriate to their needs. The Drought Resilience Funding Plan provides an opportunity for long-term change, capacity building, and meaningful engagement with First Nations.

If any local or regional engagement/governance bodies are established as part of the Drought Resilience Funding Plan, the MDBA strongly advocates for the group to be representative of all interests and this must include First Nations people. These groups must also be culturally safe and inclusive so First Nations people feel empowered to contribute and be able to make meaningful change for their communities.



4. Economic Diversity

Agriculture is an important part of many Australian communities, and it supports other industries such as retail and local services. Investments that encourage agriculture to adapt and be more resilient to drought will have flow on benefits to local communities.

Earning income by improving a farm’s natural capital is supported by the MDBA. Improving soil health, biodiversity and native vegetation reduces climate risk and increases resilience to drought on farm. This may also provide additional farm income through payment for ecosystem services and increased productivity of crops and livestock. Improving soil health has the added benefit of increasing water productivity, meaning irrigated crops need less water.

Regional communities with greater economic diversity are more resilient to drought and more able to adapt to change. While it is important that the Drought Resilience Funding Plan supports a resilient agricultural sector, the MDBA encourages the Australian Government to broaden the Fund to build resilience in a range of industries, supporting economic diversity in regional communities and in turn, boosting long term resilience of communities. This could include consideration of tourism and recreation-based industries, but also ecosystem services and services such as retail, health and education.

Case study: As part of the MDBA’s 2017 Evaluation of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan, the social and economic benefits of environmental water were assessed. The study found that industries such as tourism and recreation contribute to the strength of the Basin economy and to the health and wellbeing of its residents. When environmental conditions deteriorate, as they did during the Millennium Drought, outcomes for people and communities deteriorate. Recreation and tourism-based industries suffer as visitor numbers drop, while amenity and other social and cultural values derived from water ecosystems decline. Investment in improvement of ecological conditions was found to improve social and economic outcomes, with benefits in the form of improved amenity and recreation opportunities, job and income growth in the tourism sector, and benefits to farming and other consumptive water users from improved water quality¹.

Recommendations for program design and delivery

5. Accessibility

The program needs to be easy to access and apply for. We know application processes are a barrier to uptake, and small communities may need facilitators to help them to apply.

Accessibility must be considered in program design.

¹ Murray–Darling Basin Authority, 2017, 2017 Basin Plan Evaluation technical report: Social and economic benefits from environmental watering.

6. Peer-to-peer learning

Research shows that people learn from their peers—Traditional Owners learn from their Elders, farmers learn from farmers, industry leaders learn from each other—peer to peer learning is a fundamental mechanism across many demographic subgroups. The emphasis of strategic priority economic resilience for an innovative and profitable agricultural sector focuses heavily on research and extension, with some information sharing noted. Strengthening this idea to support promotion of existing case studies of innovative land management techniques, communities of practice around sustainable land management would help to build capacity and increase uptake.

7. Alignment with other structural adjustment programs

Water reforms have had a significant impact on communities and with the current drought exacerbating these impacts, it will be important that the Drought Resilience Funding Plan also aligns with and/or leverages existing structural adjustment programs and funding. Communities are looking for coordinated Commonwealth support to adjust to the impacts they are experiencing.

8. Water infrastructure

The MDBA notes that the Drought Resilience Funding Plan complements the Australian Government’s investment in the National Water Grid Authority and in the development of new water infrastructure. The MDBA encourages the Australian Government to consider innovative solutions to promote both efficient water use and community wellbeing in drought.

The MDBA has received feedback that seeing water and green vegetation in the community during drought helps with wellbeing and resilience. There are innovative water-sensitive urban and town design methods, and urban and town habitat restoration approaches, that can provide these benefits and others (such as reducing the impacts of extended heat waves). There are also innovative urban water supply technologies that could reduce pressure on river systems to supply critical human water needs and potentially better secure urban water supplies. The ‘Enhancing community facilities’ Action under the social resilience priority is currently limited in scope and could be broadened to capture these broader benefits.

Murray–Darling Basin Authority

12 December 2019