

# Report on how local communities influenced Basin Plan implementation – Murray-Darling Basin Authority

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority's annual report on using local knowledge and solutions to implement the Basin Plan (Schedule 12, Item 6)

## Reporting context

The success of the Basin Plan and associated water reforms depends on working closely with communities and stakeholders who can provide the necessary local knowledge and solutions to effectively implement the Plan.

The Basin Plan requires Basin States, the Authority and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder to draw on local knowledge and solutions across a range of Basin Plan activities including long-term watering plans, annual environmental watering priorities and water resource plans.

It also requires that the best available knowledge (including scientific, local and cultural knowledge), evidence and analysis be used where practicable to ensure credibility, transparency and usefulness of monitoring and evaluation findings.

The purpose of this report is to monitor the extent to which local knowledge and solutions have influenced implementation of the Basin Plan during 2013-14. The report is a requirement of Chapter 13 of the Basin Plan and relates to Item 6 of Schedule 12.

## Indicators for measuring success

The use of local knowledge to inform Basin Plan implementation is evaluated using the following indicators:

- Processes used to identify stakeholders from local communities, peak bodies and individuals (**Indicator 6.1**)
- How stakeholders were engaged (**Indicator 6.2**)
- How engagement influenced Basin Plan implementation (**Indicator 6.3**)

### Indicator 6.1: Processes used to identify stakeholders from local communities, peak bodies and individuals

Response
<p><b>Ongoing</b></p> <p>The MDBA has specialist engagement staff to map and manage stakeholder relationships and assist program areas in their local engagement activities. This includes management of a client relationship database.</p> <p>The MDBA's Basin Community Committee (established under section 202(1) of the <i>Water Act 2007</i>) guides incorporation of local knowledge into Basin Plan implementation.</p> <p>The Northern Basin Advisory Committee (established under subsection 203(1) of the <i>Water Act 2007</i>), provides advice on Basin Plan implementation in the northern Basin.</p> <p>The MDBA harnesses Indigenous knowledge through supporting the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations' (MLDRIN) and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations' (NBAN) participation in Murray-Darling Basin planning and programs and seeking their advice on specific issues.</p>
<p><b>2013-14</b></p> <p><i>Constraints management</i></p> <p>The MDBA established a consultation and collaboration plan to guide identification of stakeholders in key catchment areas across the Basin. An MDBA project leader was assigned to each regional area.</p> <p><i>Social and economic work</i></p> <p>The Social and economic team built a network of stakeholders over 2013-14 starting with a base of stakeholders identified during development of the Basin Plan. This network continues to expand as existing stakeholders offer new linkages and sources of information. The team's network includes people who are interested in, and/or impacted by, the Basin Plan, as well as those who have information relevant to MDBA analyses (for example, bank and agribusiness managers, chambers of commerce and universities).</p> <p><i>Environmental water planning</i></p> <p>The MDBA developed a collaboration and consultation strategy to identify and analyse stakeholders and map out appropriate engagement activities for development of the Basin-wide Environmental Watering Strategy and the 2013-14 Basin Annual Environmental Watering Priorities (BAEWP).</p> <p>Identification of stakeholders for the development of the Basin-wide Environmental Watering Strategy was guided by section 8.15 of the Basin Plan and built on existing MDBA networks</p> <p>Identification of stakeholders for development of the BAEWP was guided by section 8.29 of the Basin Plan. The MDBA engaged with the following stakeholders:</p>

## Response

- Basin Plan Working Group
- Advisory Committee on Social, Economic and Environmental Sciences
- Northern Basin Advisory Committee
- Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations
- Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations
- Murray Darling Basin Community Committee
- River Murray Water Committee
- The Living Murray Committee
- Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder
- Basin State government representatives and groups
- Environmental Water Advisory Groups (NSW and Vic)
- The Strategic Thinkers Group (a scientific and environmental industry expert advisory group)
- Practitioners groups (practitioner groups consist of government and non-government environmental specialist representatives who meet to discuss specific matters such as vegetation, native fish and birds).

## Indicator 6.2: How stakeholders were engaged

### Response

The MDBA held over 145 community meetings throughout the Basin in 2013-14. This included general updates on implementing the Basin Plan and targeted consultation on key pieces of work.

The MDBA adopted a 'no-surprises' approach to developing the Constraints Management Strategy, the Annual Environmental Water Priorities and the draft Basin-wide Environmental Watering Strategy (due to be published in late November 2014), engaging with stakeholders throughout the development phase (discussed below).

#### *Constraints management*

The MDBA Project leaders for each constraint area worked through the year with riparian landholders, councils, regional state NRM organisations, water delivery authorities and industry groups to seek input on development of the Constraints Management Strategy. The MDBA used different engagement methods suitable to the needs of each respective stakeholder. Face-to-face contact has been the preferred method, where possible, to help establish and build relationships.

The MDBA held a formal three-week public comment period on the draft Constraints Management Strategy, which included over 20 briefing sessions across regional areas and feedback was collated, analysed and used to develop the final strategy.

#### *Social and economic work*

The social and economic team held over 70 meeting with stakeholders to develop and discuss the MDBA's approach to monitoring and evaluating the social and economic outcomes of the Basin Plan water reforms including:

- workshops to develop social and economic indicators
- one on one informal interviews with farmers to improve the modelled impacts of reduced water for agriculture, and
- semi-structured interviews for local studies.

A wide range of stakeholders participated, including: farmers, irrigation operators, local business owners, local councils, local community groups, tourism operators, universities, consultants and academics.

#### *Environmental water planning*

Draft Basin-wide Environmental Watering Strategy - Information exchange occurred via workshops, attending EWAG meetings, using email newsletters and the MDBA website. Most direct technical information was obtained from expert workshops on the key ecological outcomes (birds, fish and vegetation), and other broader information was obtained from the EWWG and the Practitioners workshop.

Basin Annual Environmental Watering Priorities - The MDBA engaged with its stakeholders throughout the development of the 2013-14 Basin Annual Environmental Water Priorities (BAEWP). Formal intergovernmental groups and advisory committees were largely provided with presentations, and supporting documentation as part of meeting processes. This also included consultation in the development and draft stages of the BAEWP.

The MDBA also attended stakeholder meetings, such as state Environmental Watering Advisory Group meetings to facilitate information sharing between stakeholders.

## Response

Other engagement approaches involved workshops and meetings focusing on the preparation and drafting of the BAEWP. Examples of these include, but are not limited to, the Water Holders and River Operators Coordination Forum and the Living Murray and Commonwealth Environmental Water Office Workshop.

### Indicator 6.3: How engagement influenced Basin Plan implementation

## Response

MDBA's approach of engaging stakeholders throughout the development of the Constraints Management Strategy, the Basin Annual Environmental Water Priorities and the first stage of developing the Basin-wide Environmental Watering Strategy enabled local knowledge to be integrated with scientific knowledge in a considered and thorough way.

Local engagement and local knowledge are at the heart of understanding the impacts of the Basin Plan on local communities. The MDBA sought local input to the design of MDBA's framework and methodology for monitoring impacts as well as input to understanding the impacts themselves. The MDBA anticipates this will engender community ownership of the socio-economic work and enhance long term monitoring in the Basin.

### *Constraints management*

Feedback from engagement activities has informed the MDBA's pre-feasibility assessment of flows under investigation. This has included feedback on the relative strengths and weaknesses of inundation mapping in key constraint areas as well as providing comment upon the relevant reach report (which captures current knowledge and information of relevance to each of the key constraint areas). The MDBA focused on gaining stakeholder input into the potential effects of the higher flows under investigation as well as potential mitigation options to address any negative impacts.

Feedback from communities has been incorporated into the MDBA's Annual Report to Basin ministers, to be finalised in late 2014, and has informed the drafting of recommendations for inclusion in that document.

### Example

Local knowledge has been incorporated in all aspects of development of the Strategy in key constraint areas. For example, MDBA established three advisory groups of local residents and businesses in the Goulburn – many of whom have decades of first-hand experience of Goulburn river conditions. This source of knowledge has been instrumental in understanding the impacts of different river flow scenarios.

This local knowledge will inform future activity should constraint areas progress to feasibility assessment, including:-

- the need for the establishment and formalisation of local working groups to represent the interests of stakeholders;
- that further investigation of the hydrology is required to more accurately understand the inundation patterns associated with specific flows;
- that better definition of frequency/timing and duration of flows is required to assist riparian landholders to assess the potential effects of higher flows
- recognition by the MDBA of the potential risks associated with some of the higher flows under investigation and that further work is required in the feasibility assessment to provide communities with the confidence that these risks can be appropriately managed, and
- better collation of information about flows at the local, state and federal levels.

MDBA staff have received positive feedback anecdotally from stakeholders engaged to-date about the engagement process being implemented. While some stakeholders have expressed concerns with some of the higher flows under investigation, most are willing to continue their participation in further investigations.

### *Social and economic work*

#### Examples

On the basis of consultation with communities the social and economic team:

- revised its proposed framework for monitoring social and economic impacts
- developed a list of social and economic indicators (note: the MDBA did not adopt all indicators suggested by communities as they were beyond the scope of the basin Plan water reforms. However, the social and economic team will use these suggested indicators as contextual information on the changes to the social and economic condition of Basin industries and communities), and

## Response

- expanded the scope of the local studies' interviews, in effect broadening the methodology

As a result of the consultation on social and economic indicators, the MDBA and communities have an improved understanding of the potential impacts of Basin Plan water reforms.

### *Environmental water planning*

Stakeholders provided an integral contribution to the 12-13 BAEWP. Consultation with stakeholders who represented the Basin States, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, river operators, community views and indigenous values informed the process from drafting to finalisation of the BAEWP.

### Examples

- local communities helped identify watering priorities in the Basin. Knowledge gained from the Lachlan Riverine Working Group (LRWG) informed the 2013-14 priority, *improve ecosystem resilience amongst wetland vegetation communities in the lower Lachlan wetland*. The LRWG is a cohesive group representing the Indigenous community, landholders, NSW Government agencies, Inland Rivers Network and Lachlan Valley Water Users. This resulted in the largest environmental watering of the Lachlan ever and communities observed early environmental responses with the endangered southern bell frog recorded in the Lachlan for only the second time since the 1970s.
- local communities also influenced which areas should not be included in the 2013/14 priorities. For example, concerns about the potential impacts of environmental watering on properties in the mid-Murrumbidgee contributed to the decision to not include that area in the priorities.

Local knowledge will continue to inform development of the Basin-wide Environmental Watering Strategy as it is finalised in the 2014-15 year.