

# Matter 6 - Report on how local communities influenced Basin Plan implementation – NSW

The NSW 2014–15 annual report on using local knowledge and solutions to implement the Basin Plan (Schedule 12, Item 6)

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## 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 2014–15. 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:

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

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## 6.1: How engagement influenced Basin Plan implementation

*Where possible include specific examples of:*

- *how local knowledge and solutions were used by the reporter*
- *how involving communities made a difference to Basin Plan implementation*
- *how decisions changed as a result of community involvement*

*Local knowledge might include knowledge drawn from Traditional Owners and other Indigenous people and groups. When reporting on Aboriginal participation and influence, processes of involvement may be as important as outcomes.*

*In 2014-15 reporting, we would expect use of local knowledge to feature in development of Water Resource Plans.*

*Examples or case studies are not mandatory but may be a useful way to describe how local knowledge and solutions inform implementation of the Basin Plan.*

*(max. 800 words)*

### **Response**

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In 2014-15 NSW DPI Water has commenced engagement for Batch 1 Water Resource Plan (WRP) development. This has included development of Stakeholder Advisory Panels for each surface water WRP to discuss management options. These panels include representatives of water users and environmental interests. In the alluvial groundwater WRP areas initial meetings have been held with targeted stakeholder groups to inform them on the NSW plan review processes and kick off engagement on WRP development. Aboriginal engagement has also commenced through the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) and the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN), as well as local Aboriginal stakeholders. Information from engagement is used to inform matters such as issues to be considered in water sharing plans. To date only initial engagement has occurred.

Environmental Watering Advisory Groups (EWAGs) are the primary collaborative forum to guide the use of environmental water in NSW. The objective of each EWAG is to combine the knowledge and experience of stakeholders, including regional community representatives to provide advice on the use of managed environmental water in their catchment. This advice is then incorporated by NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) into an annual watering plan, which describes watering assets and targets (annual watering priorities), the recent history of natural and environmental water flows, preceding conditions and a forecast of available water. These are developed in collaboration with Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO) and in alignment with the Basin Plan. Annual watering priorities are informed by both the longer-term planning objectives and the information on current status of ecological assets and the Basin Watering Priorities. Over time, EWAGs are progressively influencing the focus of monitoring and other forms of scientific investigation. The role, performance and achievements of EWAGs in regards to Basin Plan implementation are further discussed below in section 6.2 and 6.3.

An independent review of EWAGs was commissioned by OEH to provide objective information on their performance, particularly from diverse stakeholder perspectives (Appendix A). Overall, the review found that EWAGs are a successful mechanism for public participation in environmental water management and reflect an effective localism approach.

As OEH proceeds with the development long-term watering plans, EWAGs and other important stakeholders, including other NSW agencies and CEWO, are being engaged to identify assets, risks and long-term watering objectives. Groups guiding long-term water plan development have

been formed in the Gwydir and Macquarie-Castlereagh and have provided valuable input into the planning process in both these valleys.

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**6.2:** Processes used to identify stakeholders and other relevant groups and individuals from local communities and peak bodies

*Where possible include process used to identify stakeholders and other relevant groups/individuals (max. 800 words)*

**Response**

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In regard to Stakeholder Advisory Panels, the Customer Service Committees and Environmental Water Advisory Groups (EWAGs) are asked to identify representatives from within their groups to represent key stakeholder interests in surface water discussions.

DPI Water has knowledge of key stakeholder groups from previous planning activities and draws on this knowledge to identify groups for targeted consultation and mailouts.

In regard to Aboriginal consultation, officers from DPI Water's Aboriginal Water Initiative (AWI) Unit draw on their own and community knowledge to build up a list of relevant contacts within each plan area. The Unit was established in 2012 by the (then) Office of Water to ensure there is ongoing effective state-wide and regional engagement with Aboriginal communities in water sharing plans (WSPs).

The MDBA has recently provided a map of Traditional Owner groups as a guide in engagement activities and input from NBAN and MLDRIN is also sought.

Between 2007 and 2010, NSW formed EWAGs for each WRP area. These were developed through relevant WSPs identifying relevant stakeholder groups. The original memberships reflected the acknowledged diversity of stakeholder interests at the time of the WSP development. In 2009, OEH reviewed the groups' memberships and strengthened Indigenous stakeholder representation and assigned chairing roles to Catchment Management Authorities (now Local Land Services). Further reviews have determined that the expectations of both government and stakeholders are being met and are adequately resourced and supported.

While EWAGs have been central in developing annual watering priorities, they are currently playing a pivotal role in the development of long-term watering plans. In addition to EWAG contributions to long-term watering plans, OEH is also seeking input from other government agencies, industry and community groups to ensure stakeholders have early and ongoing input into long-term water planning. Specifically, these groups will provide for greater accountability and transparency in the OEH's decision making process in developing these water plans across all WRP areas.

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**6.3:** How stakeholders and other relevant groups and individuals were engaged

*Where possible include:*

- *range of audiences engaged*
- *range of opportunities (types of engagement)*
- *relate these to the Basin Plan obligations to have regard to local views (Chapter 8 and 10)*

*(max. 800 words)*

## Response

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For surface water WRPs, engagement to date has been through the establishment of Stakeholder Advisory Panels. The Stakeholder Advisory Panels will meet on a regular basis to provide forums for discussion on plan issues and management options.

For groundwater water WRPs, the engagement to date has been limited to meetings with targeted stakeholders to inform them of the planning process and opportunities for input in the future.

Aboriginal engagement has included peak groups as well as individuals in community. This has been via presentations, one-on-one conversations, as well as workshops.

Operational cultures for EWAGs have evolved over time in each WRP area. Each one has developed its own operational style, but all have an appropriate diversity of stakeholder representatives and therefore an appropriate range of relevant audiences. The value of EWAGs is that all audiences, via their representatives, participate equally through regular face-to-face meetings, teleconferences and other forms of communication when necessary (e.g. during event delivery). Broader communication is via records of meetings, bi-annual newsletters of environmental water management and annual outcome reports.

EWAGs act as sounding boards for the implementation of environmental watering, provide community endorsement for watering actions, and act as forums for information exchange. They are also an important platform for communities to deal with existing and ongoing tensions and conflicts around environmental water. During planning meetings, a range of possible scenarios are canvassed and the implications for each stakeholder/audience group are discussed and resolved. Occasionally alternate views are recorded for those stakeholder members who cannot accept the majority view. EWAGs also advise during event delivery if conditions that were not anticipated during planning provide opportunities for environmental gains.

While the primary focus of EWAGs has been to advise on annual watering priorities, their role is being extended to provide input to long-term watering plans. Plan development is being undertaken in consultation with local communities including people affected by the management of environmental water, relevant NSW agencies and the CEWO.

An annual workshop is held in autumn to review that year's watering actions and to identify aspects of the EWMP where improvements are desirable. The basic format is a day of presentations from each valley on the planning for, delivering and responses to watering events, and a day clarifying and identifying possible solutions to the issues arising.

NSW has been working closely with local landholders in the Murray Valley to identify suitable wetlands for environmental watering under the Private Property Wetlands Watering Project. The voluntary program focuses on improving the health of private wetlands and ephemeral creeks that have become isolated from natural flooding and no longer receive adequate water. By working closely with local landholders, positive working partnerships have been developed in the community. This has resulted in positive outcomes across the Murray Valley, including:

- improvement of native vegetation
- bird breeding events
- frog breeding (including Southern Bell Frog).

Other engagement activities involving stakeholders, local landholders and other relevant groups include field days, and numerous meetings with stakeholders and communities regarding environmental watering events in the five priority WRP areas (Murrumbidgee, Macquarie, Lachlan, Gwydir and the Murray and Lower Darling).