Australian Government

MURRAY–DARLING BASIN AUTHORITY

Special accounting – water sharing in dry times

The Murray–Darling Basin has a highly variable climate, and with conditions differing each year and across regions. Planning for wet and dry conditions is a major challenge for river operators, water resource managers and the community.

Rules for water sharing are critical to ensure enough water is available in the River Murray System to meet critical human and system requirements and enough is held for future reserves. After priority water is set aside, the amount of remaining water in the River Murray systems is calculated by the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and made available to the Basin states to allocate to their entitlement holders.

Special accounting is a form of water sharing that comes into effect during dry conditions in the southern Basin when forecast reserves are low. Special accounting adjusts water sharing arrangements between New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, which is scaled back when there is less water available. This ensures each state gets an agreed share of water even when there is less to share.

The rules for special accounting are set out in the Murray–Darling Basin Agreement (the Agreement). The MDBA is responsible for sharing water according to the Agreement. It acts as an independent body to calculate the amount of water available to New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.

When special accounting occurs

A period of special accounting is declared by the MDBA when it is forecast that New South Wales or Victoria or both states won't have enough water in reserve by the end of the water year (31 May). States need to have a forecast 1,250 GL in reserve to avoid special accounting.

The MDBA uses worst-case scenarios to forecast water in reserve to determine if special accounting will come into effect. This conservative approach means there is a low risk that less water than expected will be available.

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Key facts

The Murray–Darling Basin has a variable climate that requires contingency planning for dry periods. Determining future water needs and continually assessing risks is required to prepare for drier periods and ensure adequate water is available.

Special accounting is part of the water **sharing rules in the Murray–Darling Basin Agreement** but is only activated in certain conditions.

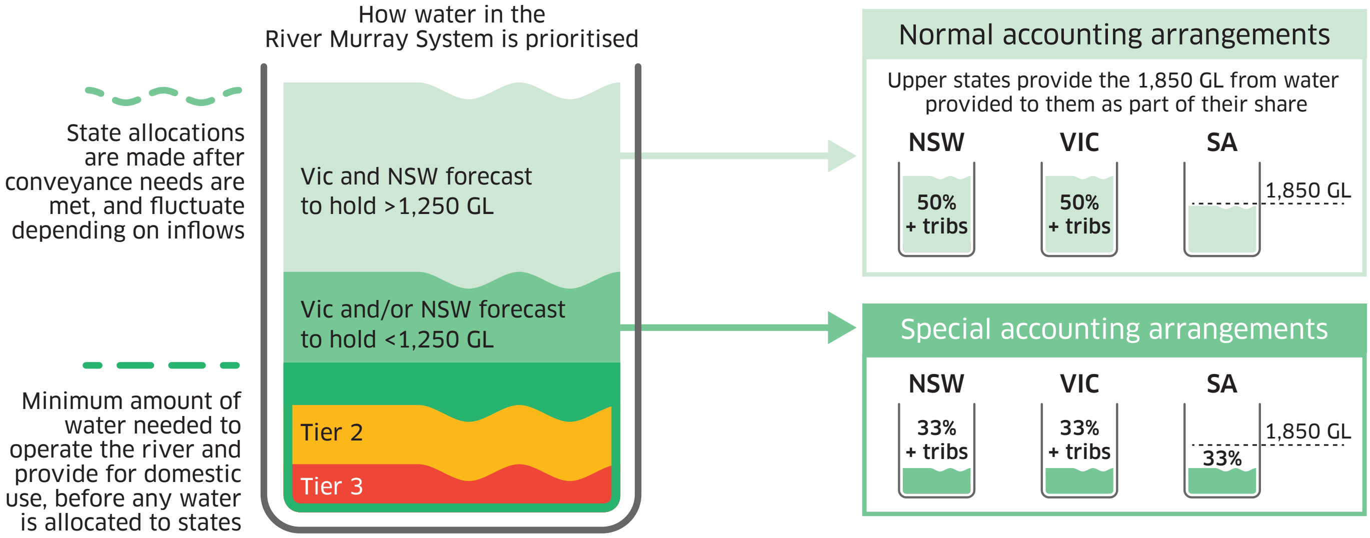
Special accounting **occurs during a dry period** when either New South Wales or Victoria are forecast to hold less than 1,250 GL in storage.

The **conveyance water reserve is the additional amount of water set aside** for the next year to minimise the risk of not enough conveyance water being available to deliver water where it's needed.

The upper states **NSW and Victoria can independently enter and exit a period of special accounting** with South Australia.

Critical human water needs are a practical measure to safeguard water for communities in drought.

Bulk water sharing arrangements



Meeting water needs

South Australia receives a specific volume (currently 1,850 gigalitres) which it can rely on each year, except when water availability is low. Victoria and New South Wales each provide half of South Australia's share from the water they have in the system.

Each state is responsible for setting aside the water they need to meet critical water needs. Once this water has been set aside states can allocate the remaining water to their entitlement holders.

When special accounting is declared to ensure water is shared appropriately, South Australia does not receive 1,850GL but receives one third of the shared resources. It does not receive inflows from the state tributaries, this water remains with New South Wales and Victoria.

Water for critical human water needs is set aside every year as a must have, along side the conveyance water needed to deliver this water to communities.

It is important that water for drinking and sanitation, gets to where it is needed without it evaporating or seeping into the riverbed.

Given the dry climate in Australia, the MDBA also places water in reserve for the following year to ensure towns don't run out of water along the River Murray.

Periods of special accounting

Special accounting can be in effect between South Australia and one upstream state or with both New South Wales and Victoria. Special accounting can be in place for a period of months to multiple years.

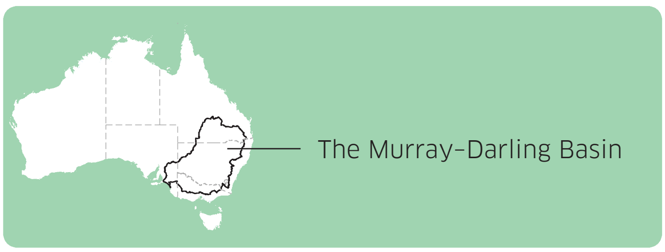
During a period of special accounting, the MDBA is required to keep additional water accounts.

These 'special accounts' record:

1. state diversions (use)
2. useful tributary flow which is the tributary flow used by New South Wales and Victoria. It does not include any tributary flows that can't be captured or used and flows to South Australia.
3. the volume of water each upper state has supplied to South Australia.

Special accounting allows states flexibility in how they manage available water during dry periods without impacting on water available to other states.

During periods of special accounting, the 'imbalance in use' is used in the calculation of water available to each state. It records the usage by states and their useful tributary inflows.



Connect with us.
The MDBA has offices in Adelaide, Albury-Wodonga, Canberra, Goondiwindi, Griffith, Mildura, Murray Bridge, Toowoomba, and regional engagement officers around the Basin.

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