The Murray–Darling Basin and water management

The Murray–Darling Basin is the largest and most complex river system in Australia.

It covers one million square kilometres of south-eastern Australia, across New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

Over the years, the combination of natural droughts and increasing human use of the waterways for agriculture, manufacturing and communities has led to a decline in the health of the Basin.

In 2012, there was widespread agreement across government that a plan was needed to manage our water carefully and protect the Basin for future generations. The Murray–Darling Basin Plan was developed to manage the Basin as a whole connected system.

The aim of the Basin Plan is to bring the Basin back to a healthier and sustainable system, while continuing to support farming and other industries for the benefit of the Australian community. It sets limits on the amount of water that can be taken from the Basin each year, while leaving enough for our rivers, lakes and wetlands and the plants and animals that depend on them.

We are all impacted directly or indirectly by the Basin and what happens to it. It’s our shared resource, so it’s our shared responsibility to achieve a sustainable and healthy river system for our current and future generations.

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

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Key facts

Australia needs a sustainable and healthy river system—our economy, food security, communities and wellbeing depend on it, now and into the future.

More than 2.6 million Australians call the Basin home.

The Basin is Australia’s largest area for agricultural production and is our main food bowl, producing $24 billion worth of food and fibre every year.

Our rivers and lakes support a unique habitat, critical to more than 120 waterbird species, 46 native fish species, and 16 protected wetlands.

Water is essential for our spiritual and cultural wellbeing—the Basin is home to more than 40 of Australia’s First Nations.

The Basin is important to our economy. It supports tens of thousands of businesses, brings in $8 billion in tourism annually and is a key driver of employment.
Water management in the Murray–Darling Basin

Usage is managed through sustainable diversion limits and within a compliance framework.

Water is allocated to the environment to protect vital ecosystems.

Salt interception schemes help mitigate salinity.

Water quality is monitored at sites along the river system.

Monitoring and evaluation are carried out on annual and five-yearly cycles.

Basin governments and communities adjust their approach in response to new information and local knowledge.

Planning and forecasting prepare for the future.

Water is managed in partnership by the Australian Government, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

Water infrastructure is developed to ensure water flows where it is needed.

Water is managed through local water plans and water resources plans.

Dams, barrages and weirs regulate water flows and facilitate delivery of water to communities, irrigators and the environment.

Water can be traded between users, within set limits.

Water quality can be affected by salinity, blue green algae, low oxygen, nutrients, turbidity and high temperatures.

Water is vital to Aboriginal culture, spirituality, identity and wellbeing.

Managing groundwater is important to preserve and improve water quality.

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