

RIVER REACH



Australian Government



December 2019

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A message from Chief Executive, Phillip Glyde



As we approach the end of the year and the summer period, it is customary for Australians to reflect on recent achievements and challenges, and to also look forward to the opportunities presented by the year ahead. It has been a big year for Basin communities and governments, in this critical year of Basin Plan implementation.

To begin, we know it's a very challenging time for the many communities who are battling one of the worst droughts on record. It's taking a toll on our landscape, people's businesses, mental health and morale. We're seeing widespread dust storms and bushfires, towns are running short of water and our environment is suffering. Some First Nations people are telling us they're concerned about the quality of their drinking water and the cultural wellbeing of their communities. Our shared reality is the ever-present threat of a mass fish death event over the coming months.

The scarcity of water makes implementing the next stage of the Basin Plan even more challenging. It also brings these issues into the Nation's focus, sparking vigorous debate and driving adaptive change. At the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), we believe it is vital that different viewpoints are heard as an important part of improving water management in the Basin. In these times, remaining committed to restoring the health of the Basin, its environment, its communities and its industries, is paramount. When times are tough, the water available to us all is stretched. The Basin Plan is a once in a life time opportunity to restore the health of this great river system for the long-term benefit of future Basin communities and the nation.

We are only half-way through the Plan, but we know it's working. This month we released the end of year [Report Card](#) outlining how Basin governments are progressing on delivering their Basin Plan commitments. The Report, noting the ongoing drought conditions, reveals great progress in many areas and shows us where there is room for more improvement.

The Authority met in Canberra earlier this month to consider the outcomes from the Report Card in addition to a range of important matters, including the progress of water resource plans (WRPs). Authority members have called upon all Basin governments to remain committed to the Basin Plan and working together in partnership to sustainably manage the joint water resources of the Murray–Darling Basin. For the full context, I urge you to read the [Authority communique](#) which was issued on 6 December 2019. I know this will remain topical in the lead up to the Ministerial Council meeting on 17 December 2019.

We have also seen a recent announcement from Water Minister David Littleproud. On 4 December, the Minister announced a new investigation to be led by former Australian Federal Police Commissioner, and Inspector-General of the Murray–Darling Basin Mick Keelty AO APM. We welcome this investigation which will examine how changing patterns of river inflows and water use have affected state water shares under the Murray Darling Agreement. This agreement and its operation play the largest role in how water is allocated between States and many commentators are not aware of how it operates.

For us here at the MDBA, we continue to focus on the progress being made in implementing the Basin Plan, evaluating the work being undertaken and working in partnership with state governments to sustainably manage the water resources of the Basin. As announced earlier this year, we will be undertaking major research into the impacts of [climate change](#). This work will be an important input into ongoing adaptive management decisions, along with the formal built-in reviews of the Basin Plan.

In 2020, we also look forward to other important studies including the release of the [Independent assessment of social and economic conditions into the Basin report](#), and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Murray–Darling Basin water markets inquiry. The ACCC will be focussed on the role and practices of water brokers, water exchanges, investment funds and other significant traders of water allocations and entitlements on the market, as well as the role and impact of carry-over practices. These reports will be important to define any course correction or adaptive change for the Basin Plan.

Finally, towards the end of 2020 our [formal Evaluation Report](#) will be delivered. It is our plan to consult and engage, not only with our partner agencies and other scientific bodies, but also with communities in the Basin to check that our initial findings correlate with the reality on the ground. In this way, we can strengthen our findings to give the clearest picture of the State of the Basin.

As you can see, there is a lot of work underway to evaluate the current water arrangements across the Basin. I want to reaffirm my earlier point that during these difficult climatic times, we need to remain committed to the long-term vision of restoring the health of the Basin for future generations.

From all of us here at the MDBA, we thank you for your ongoing interest and support over the last twelve months and we look forward to working together to support the Basin in 2020 and beyond.

We wish you a happy and safe festive season.

Phillip Glyde

Chief Executive, Murray-Darling Basin Authority

Keep up-to-date with our [MDBA media releases](#), and read the latest communiques from:

- [the Murray–Darling Basin Authority](#)
- [Basin Community Committee](#)
- [Advisory Committee on Social, Economic and Environmental Sciences](#)
- our one-stop-shop for [water management 101 factsheets](#).

Working together to support native fish



Murray cod

Australians will remember the many native fish that died last summer because of low flows, high temperatures and poor water quality being experienced in many parts of the Murray–Darling Basin. Unfortunately, more native fish deaths are expected this summer as the drought continues.

There are a wide range of causes of fish death events, including water quality changes, pollution such as that caused by bushfires, infection and disease, or a combination of causes. For example, drought conditions, blue-green algae and a change in temperature, resulting in reduced dissolved oxygen, collectively are thought to have led to the 2018–19 fish death event

in the Lower Darling. Basin state governments, supported by the Australian Government, are working to ensure as many fish as possible can survive the hot and dry conditions expected during the next few months, however, continued low rainfall, high temperatures and poor water quality means that fish deaths are inevitable.

Many of the high-risk sites are in NSW and in recognition of this, the NSW Government has committed \$10m to manage risks. Recently we asked Cameron Lay from NSW Department of Primary Industries - Fisheries about NSW's plans and activities to support native fish and how people can report issues to the state authority. Listen to the [interview with Cameron here](#).

The MDBA is supporting collaboration and coordination of emergency response activities via whole-of-Basin native fish risk management forums. The MDBA has also released emergency contingency funds via the Native Fish Management and Recovery Strategy to manage urgent and extreme fish death risks of Basin-scale significance.

Sam Roseby, MDBA Director Riverine Ecology advises, "Each state has its own program of work and together with Basin states we have developed a plan that sets out how Basin governments will manage significant fish death risks over the summer of 2019–20."

This plan outlines how the Australian Government will complement the actions of Basin state governments and when appropriate, take an active support role to reduce the likelihood or consequences of fish deaths.

To report on fish deaths please contact the relevant state authority:

- New South Wales Fishers Watch hotline: 1800 043 536
- Queensland Department of Environment and Science: 1300 130 372
- Victoria Environmental Protection Authority pollution hotline: 1300 372 842
- South Australia Fishwatch Hotline: 1800 065 522
- Australian Capital Territory - Access Canberra: 13 22 81

Find out more about water quality risks in the Murray-Darling Basin, and actions being taken to protect native fish.

Drought update



Each fortnight we publish a drought update which includes rainfall and water quality information from across the Basin.



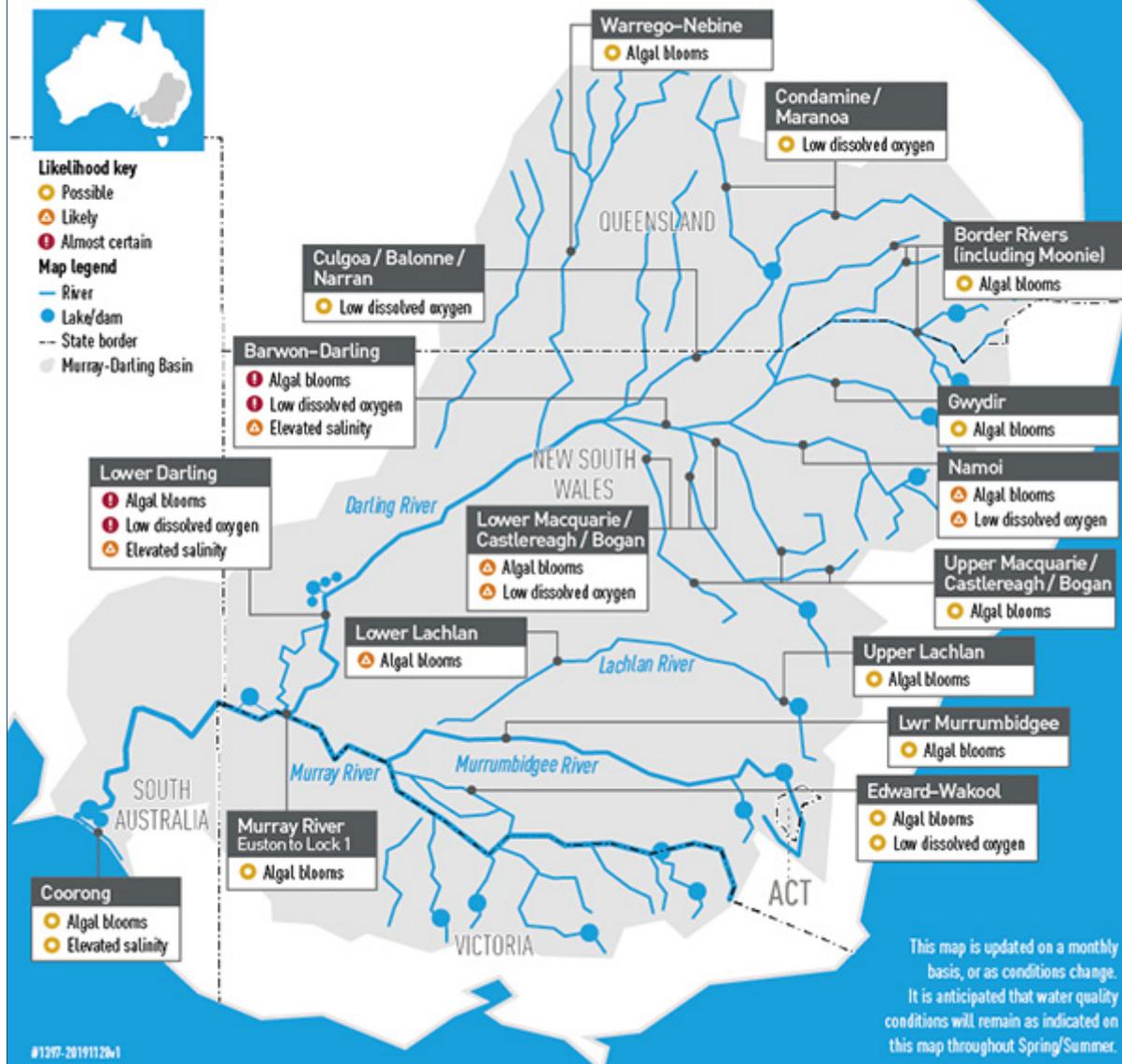
View and bookmark the drought update.

Each fortnight, the MDBA publishes a Drought Update on our website. This update includes the latest information about rainfall and river flows, temperatures, water quality (including salinity), water storage levels, support and assistance services and other drought related news for the Basin.

To complement the Drought Update, a short video featuring Andrew Reynolds, MDBA Executive Director River Management explains the outlook for water in the Basin for this summer. [Watch the video here.](#)

Water quality threat map released

Threats to water quality in the Murray-Darling Basin November 2019



We can't make it rain but as part of our response to the continuing drought, we can identify locations that are hot spots for potential water quality issues across the Murray–Darling Basin.

Recently, the MDBA released a [Water quality threat map](#) that shows the type of water quality issues that could emerge for locations in the Basin. The map will be updated monthly and includes the likelihood of incidents occurring, ranging from 'possible' to 'almost certain'.

Basin state governments provide information for this map and while we don't expect conditions to markedly change from month to month, it is possible that new hot spot locations will quickly emerge while others may be removed between map editions.

Water resource plan (WRP) an update on accreditation progress



River Murray downstream of Yarrawonga Weir.

WRPs are an integral part of the Basin Plan. They are a starting point for establishing new rules on how much water can be taken from the system, while leaving enough to keep the environment healthy. WRPs aim to strengthen water management at a local level and outline how each region will seek to achieve community, cultural, environmental and economic outcomes.

The MDBA has released the latest quarterly report for the period up to 30 November 2019, detailing the status of the Basin's 33 WRPs. We continue to see good progress in the development of WRPs by Basin state and territory governments, and the assessment of submitted plans by the MDBA.

At this stage, eight plans are accredited and are in operation. Plans from Queensland, Victoria, ACT and South Australia are well progressed, and should be assessed and accredited by 1 July 2020.

The New South Wales government has indicated severe drought conditions may impact delivery of water resource plans. Recent advice suggests there is a risk NSW may not meet the submission deadline of 31 December 2019 and plans may not be submitted until after the drought has broken.

If this is the case, there are legislative processes in place to negotiate a solution and the MDBA is committed to working cooperatively with New South Wales. If negotiations fail, the Commonwealth Minister may request that the MDBA develop and submit WRPs.

“Yes, we are behind schedule according to the timeframe we originally determined back in 2012. But as we’ve collectively gained a better understanding of the complexities and level of consultation, review and assessment required for each plan, arrangements were put in place to facilitate extensions. We’ve also ensured—by way of bilateral agreements, that sustainable diversion limits and measures to protect and better manage environmental water were in place from 1 July this year,” said Marcus Finn, General Manager of Water Resource Plans at the MDBA.

“We now have eight plans accredited and therefore fully operational, and with Victoria having submitted revised plans on Friday 22 November”.

- [Find out more about water resource plans](#) and the accreditation process and watch a [short video message](#) from MDBA WRP spokesperson Marcus Finn.

Northern Basin Report tabled in Parliament

On December 5, the Commonwealth Minister responsible for water, David Littleproud, announced the tabling of the [Northern Basin Commissioners First Year Report](#).

The Report, developed by Commissioner Mick Keelty AO APM, calls for more compliance attention to environmental outcomes, improved transparency of water management decisions, stronger engagement with Aboriginal nations and to simplify policy settings.

Mr Keelty was appointed as the [Interim Inspector-General of the Murray-Darling Basin](#) in October 2019, as a bipartisan initiative to secure support for critical Basin Plan amendments. This is the first and final report Northern Basin Commissioner Report, which outlines recommendations to better serve the communities across the Murray-Darling Basin. Minister Littleproud will be tabling the report at the Minister Council on 17 December 2019, to discuss the report’s recommendations and next steps. The full Report is available from www.igmdb.gov.au.

Water Efficiency Program registrations now open



Registrations are now open for the Department of Agriculture's \$1.5 billion Water Efficiency Program designed to improve water efficiency and deliver 450 gigalitres of water for the environment across the Murray-Darling Basin by 2024.

The program will fund water saving projects by agricultural businesses, as well as water infrastructure providers, local governments and councils, industries, property developers and public utilities. Efficiency projects will be considered if they deliver positive or neutral socio-economic outcomes, as per the historic agreement between Basin Ministers in December 2018.

If you have held water rights for at least three years in the Murray-Darling Basin, you may be eligible for funding. If you want to learn more - the Department of Agriculture features individual stories from people whose farms and businesses are profiting from their water-saving projects. For example, you can learn how citrus grower [Stuart Pettigrew](#) is working to increase his yield to 45–50 tonnes of fruit per hectare while saving 12 megalitres of water to help restore our river system.

To check your eligibility and to apply (as a project partner or through a delivery partner) please visit: <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/water/mdb/programs/basin-wide/water-efficiency>.

Updated strategy released for environmental watering



Barmah-Millewa Forest

Everyone who uses the waterways of the Murray–Darling Basin benefits from a healthy river. Water for the environment is used to improve the health of the river, for all those who rely on it. Providing the right amount of water for the environment, in the right places and at the right times is complex. There are a number of priorities and strategies that help make decisions about how to use water for the environment across the Basin

The *Basin-wide environmental watering strategy* is the long-term watering plan for the Basin. It sets out the improvements that we expect to see for river flows and connectivity, native vegetation, waterbirds and native fish with the water being recovered for the Basin environment and other measures to improve flows in the river system.

The strategy supports environmental water holders, Basin state governments, water managers and river operators to plan and manage environmental watering at a Basin scale and over the long term, to achieve the Basin Plan's environmental objectives.

The MDBA has reviewed the Strategy in consultation with key stakeholders and updated it to reflect policy changes and new scientific knowledge. We've added a clear objective to 'maximise environmental outcomes through effective and efficient environmental water management' and greater consideration of 'all water' in achieving environmental outcomes. The updated Strategy reinforces the need to relax constraints and solve issues with water delivery to achieve the Basin Plan's objectives.

We've also identified the work the MDBA will do in conjunction with Basin governments, environmental water holders, river operators, First Nations' people and other key groups to inform the next update, in 2022.

- Find out more about the [2019 Basin-wide environmental watering strategy](#)
- Find out more about [water for the environment](#)

Basin communities celebrate 100 years of Hume Dam



Hume Dam

On 28 November, communities from across the Murray–Darling Basin celebrated 100 years since the first sod was turned on the construction of the Hume Dam. On its completion, it was the biggest dam in the southern hemisphere, and one of the largest in the world.

Governor General Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson turned the first sod in 1919 and the dam took 17 years to build. At its peak in 1927, the project involved more than 1000 workers – 355 on the Victorian side, 650 in NSW and 89 working on Bethanga Bridge. Hume Dam was officially opened on 21 November 1936 by the Governor General Lord Gowrie.

Our MDBA team members from the Wodonga office attended a centenary event, together with the Mayors of Albury City, Wodonga Council and Towong Shire, to unveil new [interactive signage](#) at the Hume Dam.

Charles Sturt University, in conjunction with La Trobe University and Albury & District Historical Society also supported the centenary, hosting an event to mark the occasion. The event ***The 'Explorations Series - Living with the Hume Dam, 1919-2019'*** was an opportunity for river system operators, dam managers, environmentalists, historians, photographers and musicians to share stories and reflect on the centenary of Hume Dam. Andrew Reynolds, MDBA Executive Director River Management, presented on the challenges of running the River Murray system.

- Find out more about [River Murray Operations](#)

Getting the facts out there



We know that water management is complex. We have been working hard to clarify some of the facts about running the river system in the current climate. We have been providing key facts on the Barmah Choke, losses and unused water allocations, management of Menindee Lakes and using water for the environment in drought. These fast facts help everyone understand the basics of how key elements of water management works. Keep an eye out for more key facts in 2020.

- Find out more on our website by visiting [Murray-Darling Rivers – The Facts](#).

On the horizon

17 December 2019
MDBA Ministerial Council
in Brisbane

**25 December 2019–
1 January 2020**
MDBA offices will be
closed

20 December 2019
Compliance Compact
Review

3-4 March 2020
Outlook 2020 - ABARES
Outlook 2020 conference

2 February 2020
World Wetlands Day

The Murray-Darling Basin



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

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