



Australian Government



# Water resource plans – March 2021 quarterly report

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### Acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners of the Murray–Darling Basin

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority pays respect to the Traditional Owners and their Nations of the Murray–Darling Basin. We acknowledge their deep cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and economic connection to their lands and waters.

The guidance and support received from the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations and our many Traditional Owner friends and colleagues is very much valued and appreciated.

# Water resource plan progress

Water resource plans are an integral part of implementing the Basin Plan as they set new rules on how much water can be taken from the system, ensuring sustainable diversion limits are not exceeded over time. They also protect water for the environment, cultural values and uses and water quality.

Basin state governments are responsible for developing water resource plans (WRPs). The Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) assists states in developing this material and is responsible for assessing WRPs and making an accreditation recommendation to the Commonwealth Minister responsible for water (the Minister). Ultimately the Minister will make the final decision on WRP accreditation.

The MDBA applies a consistent framework to assess each WRP against Basin Plan requirements and has ensured resources are dedicated to the water planning and assessment task. The MDBA is required to apply and follow the processes set out in the *Water Act 2007* (Cth) (the Act) in undertaking this task.

The MDBA uses a WRP assessment framework that includes a range of policy and guidance materials to support the preparation and accreditation of WRPs. The [WRP assessment framework](#) was published in October 2018 on the MDBA website.

Within the MDBA, procedures to ensure a robust process include the provision of training modules to all staff associated with WRP assessment. In addition, an external provider has been contracted to undertake a process review aimed at providing confidence that due diligence arrangements have been followed and that the assessment recommendation is justified.

The MDBA has found that, initially, some WRPs have not met Basin Plan requirements. In these circumstances we have worked closely with the relevant Basin state(s) to further explore the issue and resolve a way forward.

There are 33 WRP areas in total, 19 for surface water, 19 for groundwater, including five that cover both. Thirteen WRPs have been accredited and are currently operational, including all Queensland, Victorian, ACT and South Australian WRPs.

## **New South Wales plans**

On 9 April 2020, New South Wales submitted its 11 proposed groundwater WRPs for assessment. The remaining nine proposed surface water WRPs were submitted by 30 June 2020.

There is no timeframe set for WRPs to be accredited, however, bilateral agreements were established to ensure key elements of the WRPs were given effect from 1 July 2019 for states where WRPs were not accredited. In the case of NSW, a new [bilateral agreement](#) has been agreed to cover the 2020–21 water year, as accredited WRPs were not in place by 30 June 2020. Another factor that has affected the submission of NSW WRPs and is having an impact on assessment timeframes are the changes to working arrangements across government and other sectors as a result of COVID-19.

## **Adapting to future change**

Water management will continue to evolve and changes to accredited WRPs are anticipated as new information comes to hand.

The MDBA is establishing processes to support the assessment and re-accreditation of WRPs consistent with the requirements of the Act. This will involve a tailored assessment approach that is suited to the scale and complexity of an amendment. [WRP amendment guidelines](#) have been developed to guide Basin States in the development of amendments and are available on the MDBA website. Regulations are also in place to enable the streamlined accreditation of minor or non-substantive amendments to WRPs. A minor or non-substantive amendment is an amendment that does not alter the substance of the WRP or affect rights or obligations and can include correcting errors of spelling, punctuation or grammar; or updating references to a law.

It is anticipated that Basin states will work closely with the MDBA prior to any amendment being submitted for assessment.

## **Compliance context**

The MDBA is also responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with WRPs. The MDBA commenced its WRP Compliance Program on 1 July 2020.

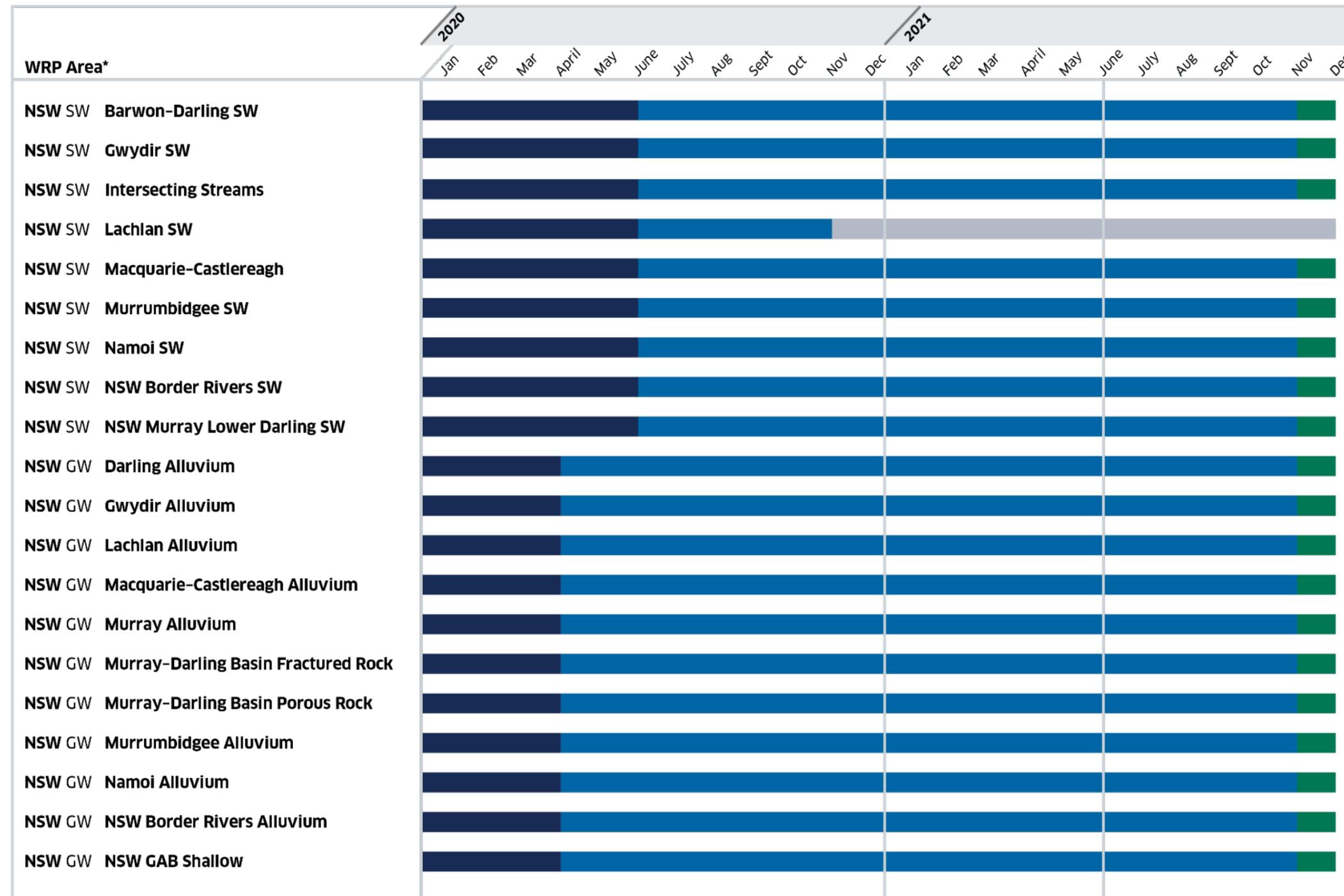
The MDBA takes a risk-based approach to ensuring compliance with WRPs using the full range of compliance tools including audits and assurance, reporting and enforcement activity. The initial focus areas for WRP compliance in 2020–21 include:

- sustainable diversion limits and water accounting
- delivery, protection and monitoring of water for the environment
- licence conditions on water access rights.

This quarterly report reflects state-by-state progress as at 28 February 2021.

# Water resource plan timeframes

Water resource plan timeframes, as at February 2021



## Timeline key

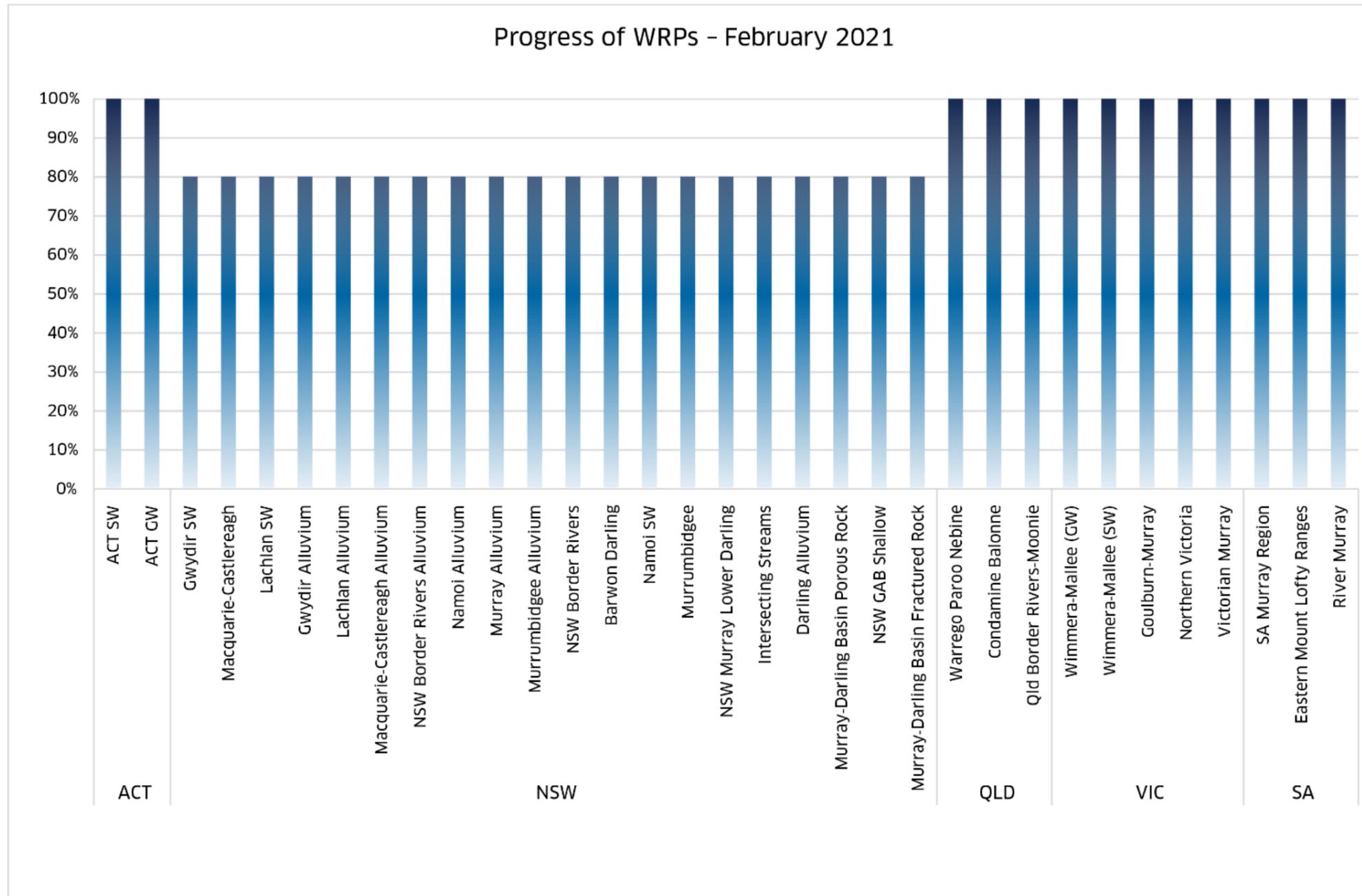
- Assist phase**  
Begins when State submits full draft of the WRP package for preliminary assessment.
- Assess phase**  
Begins when State formally submits proposed WRP package for MDBA assessment.
- Accreditation phase**  
Begins when Authority provides recommendation to the Minister. The Department briefs Minister; Minister considers WRP Package and Authority recommendation.
- WRP withdrawn**  
WRP withdrawn pending resubmission.

SW = surface water    GW = groundwater

\* All other state WRPs are accredited and operational. For accreditation timelines see previous quarterly reports.

# Progress of water resource plans from development to accreditation

The progress table indicates the current stage of development for each WRP as at February 2021.



% Complete	Water resource plan development stage
0%	Development not yet begun
10%	Preliminary planning begun
20%	Development of plan started
30%	Some early draft material available to the MDBA for review
40–60%	Progress in developing draft material, providing to the MDBA for review, and updating draft material
70%	Complete set of draft material available to the MDBA for review
80%	Final plan submitted to the MDBA for assessment
90%	MDBA recommendation provided to the Minister
100%	Plan accredited

# State-by-state progress development report

This report is MDBA's assessment of WRP development as at 28 February 2021.

The tables used in this report show the MDBA's level of confidence that each WRP is progressing, based on the state's approach and the material provided. Ratings include:

-  >75% confidence: indicates the state is making good progress
-  50–75% confidence: indicates the state is making progress
-  25–50% confidence: indicates the state is making some early progress
-  <25% confidence: indicates that so far the state has made limited progress.

# New South Wales

## Behind schedule

### **Nineteen plans with the MDBA for assessment**

New South Wales (NSW) is well behind initial WRP development timelines.

NSW submitted 11 proposed groundwater WRPs to the MDBA for formal assessment on 9 April 2020 and the remaining nine surface water WRPs were submitted to MDBA for assessment by 30 June 2020. This was a significant step forward in the accreditation process of NSW WRPs and reaffirmed NSW commitment to the Basin Plan.

The MDBA has been working through the assessment of NSW proposed WRPs using the same WRP assessment framework and level of effort applied for WRPs now in operation in all other states. This includes assessment of issues such as the protection of planned environmental water and accounting for forms of take and interception activities (such as floodplain harvesting).

During the assessment phase the MDBA may find that some WRPs do not meet Basin Plan requirements. In such cases, the MDBA will work closely with NSW through the requirements of s.63(4) of the Act, which may result in withdrawal and resubmission of a WRP. This is not unexpected and the MDBA is committed to working cooperatively with NSW to complete the assessment task as quickly as possible.

The Authority has considered the proposed WRP for the Lachlan (surface water) WRP area and identified potential inconsistencies with Basin Plan requirements. In November 2020, the Authority notified NSW of the potential inconsistencies consistent with the processes set out in the Act. In response, NSW has withdrawn the proposed Lachlan WRP and advised it will amend the proposed WRP to make it consistent with the Basin Plan before resubmitting it for assessment.

The timing and process for resubmitting WRPs that have been withdrawn is provided for in the Act and is a matter that may be negotiated between Ministers. This process is not unique to NSW. All other Basin States have had inconsistencies identified with their initial WRP submissions and changes have been required before they could be accepted for accreditation.

Consistent with all assessments conducted to date, the MDBA is seeking the advice of Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) and Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) in relation to the 'Indigenous values and uses' component of each WRP. This advice is expected to take time as it requires engagement with First Nations across all 20 WRP areas and timeframes for consultation are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic border and movement restrictions. With the easing of many restrictions throughout the Basin, NBAN and MLDRIN have commenced workshops to complete First Nation assessment of WRPs. To date, workshops have been held for seven WRP areas in NSW. The MDBA continues to work closely with NBAN and MLDRIN to ensure the assessment phase provides the necessary time and support to complete First Nation engagement on the 'Indigenous values and uses' components.

Notwithstanding the unavoidable delays associated with COVID-19, the work required to complete the assessment is an essential part of implementation of the Basin Plan. Therefore, the MDBA is giving high priority to this work and devoting additional resources to get the task completed as quickly and efficiently as is feasible.

<b>Water resource plan</b>	<b>Percentage of confidence plan is progressing to revised schedule*</b>
<b>Gwydir (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Macquarie–Castlereagh (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Lachlan (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Gwydir Alluvium</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Lachlan Alluvium</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Macquarie–Castlereagh Alluvium</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>NSW Border Rivers Alluvium</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Namoi Alluvium</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Murray Alluvium</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Murrumbidgee Alluvium</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>NSW Border Rivers (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Barwon–Darling (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Namoi (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Murrumbidgee (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>NSW Murray Lower Darling (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Intersecting Streams (SW)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Darling Alluvium</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Murray–Darling Basin Porous Rock</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>NSW GAB Shallow</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Murray–Darling Basin Fractured Rock</b>	<b>80%</b>

SW = surface water

\* NSW confidence ratings are based on the revised submission schedule agreed between the Commonwealth and NSW that has seen all 20 proposed WRPs submitted for assessment by 30 June 2020.

# Australian Capital Territory

## Completed on schedule

### Two plans accredited

All ACT WRPs are now accredited and operational.

Water resource plan	Percentage of confidence plan is progressing to schedule
ACT (SW)	100%
ACT (GW)	100%

# Queensland

## Completed on schedule

### Three plans accredited

All Queensland WRPs are now accredited and operational.

Water resource plan	Completion
Warrego–Paroo–Nebine	100%
Condamine–Balonne	100%
Qld Border Rivers–Moonie	100%

# Victoria

## Completed on schedule

### Five plans are accredited

All Victorian WRPs are now accredited and operational.

Water resource plan	Percentage of confidence plan is progressing to schedule
Wimmera–Mallee (GW)	100%
Wimmera–Mallee (SW)	100%
Goulburn–Murray	100%
Northern Victoria	100%
Victorian Murray	100%

GW = groundwater

# South Australia

## Completed on schedule

### Three plans accredited

All South Australian WRPs are now accredited and operational.

Water resource plan	Completion
South Australian Murray Region	100%
Eastern Mount Lofty Ranges	100%
South Australian River Murray	100%

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