



NRM Regions Australia welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the ongoing implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan (the Plan) and measures to support the health and prosperity of Basin environments and communities. NRM Regions Australia is the national representative body of Australia's 54 regional NRM (natural resource management) organisations- we cover all Basin states and regions, and are committed to supporting triple bottom line outcomes across the Basin.

Of particular interest to NRM Regions Australia is the implementation of complementary measures to maximise the social, economic, and environmental benefits of water recovery. All regional NRM organisations across Australia develop and implement regional NRM plans to manage and enhance natural resources to benefit regional economies, communities, and environments. We believe that involving regional NRM organisations in planning and scaling up implementation of measures that complement water recovery (complementary measures) will optimise the benefits of the Plan and deliver additional benefits to Basin Plan regions. This is described in more detail below.

### Background

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan was developed to improve the health of rivers and floodplains by putting aside water for the environment. The environmental objectives for the water-dependent ecosystems of the Murray-Darling Basin are:

- a) to protect and restore water-dependent ecosystems of the Murray-Darling Basin; and
- b) to protect and restore the ecosystem functions of water dependent ecosystems; and
- c) to ensure that water dependent ecosystems are resilient to climate change and other risks and threats.

Water for the environment is being used in parts of the Basin to improve the health of its rivers, wetlands, floodplains, and plant and animal habitats. However, water for the environment alone cannot achieve the environmental objectives in the Basin Plan. In 2016, Basin Water Ministers agreed that officials would advise on opportunities and a process to enable a wider range of environmental projects to provide triple bottom line benefits under the Basin Plan. This concept is known as 'complementary measures'. Complementary measures do not provide water offsets or an offset volume, but rather assist in improved environmental outcomes through a range of other interventions to maximise the benefits of all water in the Basin.

Types of complementary measures include:

- complementary measures that could maximise the benefits of water for the environment:
  - o planning activities to broaden and integrate waterway management strategies with environmental water management plans;
  - o restoring the connectivity between waterways and the floodplain;
  - o protecting and restoring a diverse range of riverine and wetland habitats;
  - o improving water quality and habitat;
  - o conserving and enhancing target species of flora and fauna;
  - o managing weeds, pests, and overgrazing.

- complementary measures to build community support:
  - involving local communities and traditional owners;
  - working with local First Nations groups;
  - implementing collaborative management programs with stakeholders and neighbours;
  - informing local communities.

Specific actions include enhancing fish passage; managing cold water pollution from reservoirs; improving sediment transport (erosion management); instream habitat restoration; reconnecting rivers to floodplains and wetlands; managing invasive species like carp; re-establishing threatened species; protecting riparian and wetland vegetation; and partnering with First Nations groups to deliver cultural outcomes.

While there is some funding provided by State and Federal Governments for activities that align with delivering complementary measures, investment to accelerate these actions could both improve immediate outcomes from water recovery and support achievement of other Australian Government objectives for biodiversity conservation.

Some jurisdictions have developed detailed plans outlining potential complementary projects that could be invested in. These all fit under the auspice of regional NRM plans that are bottom-up plans describing the natural assets of a region/catchment, their threats and risks, and targets for on-ground activities that will build the health and resilience of these landscapes.

#### Complementary measures and regional NRM organisations

Cresswell et al. (2017) state that developing an integrated package of proven basin-wide complementary measures, implemented along with existing investment in water recovery, would significantly enhance the capacity of the Basin Plan to meet ecological objectives.

The Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) has previously described the benefits of investing in complementary measures. For example, the MDBA Native Fish Strategy 2003-2013 shows that the cumulative benefits of investing in complementary works and measures delivers almost twice the benefits as environmental flows alone in terms of recovering fish populations to pre-European levels. Complementary works and measures provide an opportunity to maximise the benefits from all water recovered for the environment. Regional investment in complementary measures can also provide additional social and economic benefits to Basin Plan regions, including employment opportunities and social connection.

The previous productivity Commission report in 2018 recommended that:

*Basin States should manage the risks to achieving the environmental watering objectives set out in long-term watering plans by delivering complementary waterway and natural resource management measures (such as habitat restoration or weed and pest control).*

The joint Basin government response agreed with the recommendation and stated:

*The Australian Government and Basin state governments recognise that providing water is in itself not necessarily enough to secure environmental outcomes. Basin state legislation anticipates that water planning should have regard to other natural resource management planning and vice versa. Basin state governments continue to adapt their programs and resources to enhance this intent.*

*Risks to the Basin Plan's ecological outcomes can be mitigated by increasing the volume of environmental water. However, effective mitigation of ecological risk also requires non-flow measures*

*such as control of pest plants and animals in rivers and wetlands (e.g. carp, weeds, foxes) and river and wetland restoration projects.*

*Considerable work is planned or underway on a range of complementary environmental projects as part of the Basin Plan's processes, such as environmental works and measures in the northern Basin (eg. the Northern Basin Riverbanks Project), environmental works and measures through the SDL adjustment mechanism and state priority projects.*

Regional NRM organisations are the obvious partners to support the delivery of many complementary measures. Regional NRM organisations consider, plan for, and implement many of the suggested complementary measures, including in-stream and riparian habitat restoration, control of pest and weed hazards, erosion control measures, and meaningful engagement with communities. However, regional NRM organisations need more investment to undertake and support delivery of these activities at a Basin scale.

## Conclusion

The Basin Plan needs to meet the community's needs – for the environment, our farmers, regional towns, and First Nations people. It needs to sustainably manage the waters in an integrated way that supports communities. It needs to be deliverable and it also needs to be adaptable. The implementation of the Basin Plan continues to meet challenges, with substantial and sustained opposition from many regional communities. It is critical for the long-term success of the Plan that its "social licence" be built. Demonstrating that the water recovered for the environment is being used efficiently and effectively is critical for rebuilding the social licence.

Water for the environment alone cannot deliver the objectives of the Basin Plan, particularly given the ongoing and evolving impacts of climate change, biosecurity threats and land use change. We recommend that a detailed complementary measures plan be developed with the relevant Basin States and Territories. Involving regional NRM organisations in the development of such a plan will maximise landscape-scale benefits and increase its relevance in local communities.

We recommend that funding be delivered through regional NRM organisations across the Basin to deliver these complementary measures with their communities, consistent with the relevant regional NRM plans and supporting action plans. Involving regional NRM organisations in planning and delivering complementary measures will ensure that catchment benefits are maximised, through ensuring that complementary measures such as erosion and biosecurity control are integrated with ongoing action to address such threats in that region, and that opportunities to enhance biodiversity recovery across the landscape are considered and optimised.

Thank you for considering our submission to this process. For further information please contact NRM Regions Australia CEO Dr Kate Andrews: We look forward to ongoing engagement on these matters.