

Monday, 31 July 2023

Murray Darling Basin Plan: Implementation review 2023
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City, ACT
Australia, 2601

Online submission to: www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/basin-plan-2023

Balonne Shire Council Submission - MDBP: Implementation Review 2023

Balonne Shire Council would like to address questions one, six and seven, as outlined in the Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Implementation Review 2023 Call for Submissions (May 2023).

[Snapshot: Balonne Shire, Southwest Queensland](#)



Council seat:	St George
Towns:	St George, Dirranbandi, Bollon, Thallon, Mungindi and Hebel
Area:	31, 151.8km ²
Population:	4,362 (ABS ERP 2022)
GRP:	\$455 million (NIEIR 2022)
Largest industry:	Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (NIEIR 2022)

Question One: What needs to change to ensure water recovery targets are met and that supply and efficiency measures are delivered? What lessons can be learnt from past experiences?

[Lessons learnt: Socioeconomic challenges of water recovery](#)

The negative impacts of water recovery endured by our communities has included enormous social and economic disruption, which has had devastating effects on our nationally significant agricultural

industries, associated rural industries, employment and the long-term viability of our communities. The Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) Northern Basin Review on the socioeconomic effects of water buybacks (October 2016) confirmed that as a direct result of water buybacks:

- Dirranbandi lost an estimated 27% of its irrigation area and more than 15% of agriculture and non-agriculture private sector jobs
- In St George, jobs in agriculture dropped by more than 15% and non-agriculture private sector jobs were down more than 20%.

Further, census data confirms that school enrolments in Dirranbandi dropped by more than 50% in the five years prior to the report being released. While cotton production was reduced by 40,000 bales (market value of \$20million), and an estimated 197 full time skilled workers were lost across our region, including vital community leaders and volunteers.

[A community led approach to meeting water recovery targets and limiting impacts](#)

“Throughout our consultations we heard that people in Basin communities want to be part of decisions that make their communities better places to live.”

Sefton et al, 2020, Final Report: Independent assessment of social and economic conditions in the Murray–Darling Basin

The well-known and highly respected work of Robbie Sefton and Associates in the 2020 ‘Sefton Report’¹ builds on previous extensive research that clearly identifies the need for change in water planning approaches, which have historically left communities suffering and unable to recover from the devastating impacts of measures such as water buybacks.

The recent ‘Strategic water purchasing tender - Bridging the Gap 2023’, coupled with the absence of a recovery and support plan, has once again left the Lower Balonne region in an extremely vulnerable position.

¹ Sefton, R, Peterson, D, Woods, R, Kassebaum, A, McKenzie, D, Simpson, B & Ramsay, M 2020, *Final Report: Independent assessment of social and economic conditions in the Murray–Darling Basin*, Panel for Independent Assessment of Social and Economic Conditions in the Murray– Darling Basin, Melbourne.

Our communities have a strong record of developing and delivering projects of impact. We want to build upon our past successes to develop our next phase of responsive recovery, in accordance with the researched and recommended solutions in the Sefton Report. We believe this will provide the best opportunity to ensure responsive action which builds strong and resilient communities.

Balonne Shire Council has played an active role in the Lower Balonne Roundtable since its inception. The community members of this Roundtable unanimously agree that co-designed socioeconomic stimulus packages will allow communities to take an active part in shaping their futures and take responsibility for their own recovery and continued resilience, without further exacerbating the devastating effects water buybacks have had across several communities within our region, and across the wider Basin.

Since 2018, the Lower Balonne region has designed and delivered several major socio-economic projects, with successful acquittal records. Our experience has demonstrated that it is possible for communities to successfully work with government and related agencies to deliver solutions that will:

- allow water to be committed to the environment
- minimise the devastating impact water buybacks have on our nationally significant agricultural industries and our communities
- achieve positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

[Review of Northern Basin Toolkit Projects](#)

Whilst there has been significant work in recent years on progressing the Toolkit projects, we believe the protracted delays and lengthy roll out period to deliver Toolkit Measures has changed the original intent of the Toolkit projects. As such, we believe a focussed review should be undertaken to:

- review the original project intent against the current business case proposals, including the inclusions of fish ladders and other projects that are not relevant, nor designed, to be implemented in the Lower Balonne
- confirm that proposed business cases represent value for money and are realistically designed to suit the unique conditions in the Lower Balonne

- ensure projects are feasible, present the best options to achieve the goals and intent of the original Toolkit Measures and deliver real value for money, as a core objective.

We believe a review of this nature would ensure that Toolkit projects are aligned to the outcomes sought in the original Northern Basin Toolkit project scope.

[More time required to deliver water recovery targets and supply and efficiency targets](#)

We welcome the Murray-Darling Basin Authority recent announcement (25 July 2023) that full implementation of the Basin Plan will not be possible by 30 June 2024.

We believe the outcomes originally sought through water recovery, Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) projects, water resource plans and Northern-Basin initiatives should be wholeheartedly pursued within revised timeframes. More time to pursue these outcomes will give our rivers, and the communities that depend on them, the best chance of a healthy future.

Question Six: How well has community consultation and engagement been conducted? How can this be improved?

We respectfully acknowledge the support of Phillip Glyde (past Chief Executive of the MDBA) for his trust and support to trial a co-designed roundtable forum model in the Lower Balonne. We also acknowledge the MDBA team, SmartRivers and wider Basin networks for their work in instigating and developing the roundtable framework, as well as continuing to share their wisdom and provide ongoing active support. Matthew Coleman and Matthew O'Brien and their MDBA Regional Engagement Officer (REO) colleagues have been integral in their commitment to facilitate the roundtable forums and build it to the success it is today.

Unfortunately, we feel that regular turnover of government staff sometimes leads to government departments and agencies being unaware of key historical research and work. This raises concerns for us around the original intent of projects being compromised, as well as the potential for key government officials to make uninformed decisions, which could adversely impact our communities.

To ensure continuity of learning and knowledge, we feel it is vitally important for the government to take every opportunity to continuously engage with, harness and capitalise on the knowledge of long-standing community members, many of whom have been involved in these conversations and forums for more than twenty years.

Experience has shown us that the negative impacts of inadequate engagement with our communities has led to enormous social and economic disruption, which has had devastating effects on our nationally significant agricultural industries, associated rural industries, employment and the long-term viability of our communities.

We have also seen that a critical factor of success in undertaking water reforms is the ability to actively engage and work with affected communities on compensation and support packages from the outset, rather than delaying the design or implementation of these packages.

Co-Designed Socioeconomic Stimulus Model

With an acute understanding of, and evidence to support, the crippling impacts of delayed and deficient engagement has on our communities, the community members of the Lower Balonne Roundtable propose a strategy that:

- is co-designed with government and related agencies
- keeps capacity within the community
- develops confidence
- mitigates impacts on the most vulnerable members of our community.

We propose that the following staged approach would allow water recovery targets to be met, while limiting community impacts.

STAGE	Overview
Stage 1: Facilitation, research, strategy development and potential delivery mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage experienced community facilitators to ensure continuity and maximise benefits from previous work completed by others, including the Sefton and NBAC Reports. • Conduct a series of in-community roundtables and forums. • Use feedback from these sessions as the basis for strategy development, utilising a highly consultative co-designed process. • The desired outcome will be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ co-designed socioeconomic recovery strategy ○ potential delivery mechanisms to implement identified solutions ○ a best practice model which could be implemented in other parts of the Basin.
Stage 2 (\$/GL recovered)	<p>For every GL recovered under the ‘Strategic water purchasing tender - Bridging the Gap 2023’, the government will provide a predetermined figure to allow for fully funded Socioeconomic Recovery Investment Packages to implement identified socioeconomic solutions.</p>

Question Seven: What lessons should be learned from programs aimed at helping communities adjust to the Plan?

1. There is an abundance of evidence to demonstrate the crippling impacts water buybacks, coupled with delayed and deficient engagement, has on our communities. Early, active, meaningful and ongoing engagement with Basin communities will be critical to the success of the Basin Plan.
2. Communities want to play an active role in shaping their future. Our successes in Lower Balonne region demonstrate that it is both possible and desirable for government and related agencies to work with communities to co-design solutions for our shared challenges.

Balonne Shire Council would be pleased to provide further comment or information to support our submission.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the Productivity Commission inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Cr Samantha O'Toole
Balonne Shire Mayor