



Submission to the Productivity Commission
Murray-Darling Basin Plan 10-Year
Implementation Review

August 2023

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About NSW Farmers

NSW Farmers is Australia's largest state farming organisation, representing the interests of its farmer members in the state. We are Australia's only state-based farming organisation that represents farmers across all agricultural commodities. We speak up on issues that matter to farmers, whether it's the environment, biosecurity, water, animal welfare, economics, trade, workforce or rural and regional affairs.

Agriculture is an economic 'engine' industry in New South Wales. Despite having faced extreme weather conditions, pandemic and natural disasters in the past three years, farmers across the state produced more than \$23 billion in 2021-22, or around 25 per cent of total national production, and contribute significantly to the state's total exports. Agriculture is the heartbeat of regional communities, directly employing almost two per cent of the state's workers and supporting roles in processing, manufacturing, retail, and hospitality across regional and metropolitan areas. The sector hopes to grow this contribution even further by working toward the target of \$30 billion in economic output by 2030.

Our state's diverse geography and climatic conditions mean a wide variety of crops and livestock can be cultivated here. We represent the interests of farmers from a broad range of commodities – from avocados and tomatoes, apples, bananas and berries, through grains, pulses and lentils to oysters, cattle, dairy, goats, sheep, pigs and chickens.

We have teams working across regional New South Wales and in Sydney to ensure key policies and messages travel from paddock to Parliament. Our regional branch network ensures local voices guide and shape our positions on issues affecting real people in real communities. Our Branch members bring policy ideas to Annual Conference, our Advisory Committees provide specialist, practical advice to decision makers on issues affecting the sector, and our 60-member Executive Council makes the final decision on the policies we advocate on.

As well as advocating for farmers on issues that shape agriculture and regional areas, we provide direct business support and advice to our members. Our workplace relations team has a history of providing tailored, affordable business advice that can save our members thousands of dollars. Meanwhile, we maintain partnerships and alliances with like-minded organisations, universities, government agencies and commercial businesses across Australia. We are also a proud founding member of the National Farmers' Federation.

1. Introduction

NSW Farmers' Association have long standing policy that supports the implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan (MDBP), as long as there is significant focus on achieving a balance on environmental, social and economic outcomes. The MDBP in its form today is inflexible and therefore the delivery of the Plan by the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and state partners continues to be hampered in meeting this triple bottom line. A significant thread throughout the years has been the numerous reports and advice that have highlighted the shortcomings of this implementation and then provided guidance on how to better deliver the Plan. The crucial next step after this has been that often these solutions have not been taken up by governments and pressure continues to be placed on removing more water from the consumptive pool through buy backs. The social and economic wellbeing of Basin communities needs to be prioritised. Just last month, member delegates came together at our annual conference where scores of motions on the MDBP were debated on issues like the constraints projects, management of releases from storage dams and water buy backs. Our members are deeply committed to their rural and regional communities, and it is these communities that need to be a part of the solution to delivering a Basin Plan.

It was welcoming to hear from Minister Plibersek late in July that there will be an extension to the deadlines laid out in the Plan. The Productivity Commission's own review in 2018¹ stated that *"The 2024 deadline for a number of these projects (particularly the constraints projects) is highly ambitious, if not unrealistic... To enable worthwhile projects to be implemented in realistic timeframes, Basin Governments should be open to the possibility of extending the 30 June 2024 deadline..."* By extending the timeframe, this gives Basin communities the breathing space to continue to work on projects that will deliver water savings and significant environmental outcomes. In our response to Minister Plibersek's call on ideas to deliver the Basin Plan, we outlined our suggestions on how to better manage the rollout of SDL projects, as well what we think needs to change to meet both environmental and social outcomes under the Plan. Our letter to the Minister accompanies this submission.

We provide this submission to the Productivity Commission to define our ongoing concerns with the current implementation of the Plan, our suggestions on ways forward and to reiterate the importance of genuinely engaging with local communities throughout this process. The Plan has come a long way since its inception and it is important to acknowledge lessons learnt along the way, both good and bad. Our request is that those decision-makers take those lessons on board and adapt the Plan to recognise both the opportunities and limitations on a basin system and its communities in regard to how water can be delivered for all water users.

¹ <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/basin-plan/report/basin-plan.pdf>

2. Key Questions

2.1. 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?

The Water Act 2007 and The Murray Darling Basin Plan (the Plan) was initiated in the peak of the Millennium Drought leading into the 2007 election. The Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) had short timeframes and inadequate information on which to base decisions that would have major social and economic impacts to irrigated agriculture with wide ranging ramifications beyond irrigators.

It is important for this review into the implementation of the Plan to incorporate new knowledge and re-assess whether Basin Plan targets themselves were set correctly, are still achievable and recognise the economic and social cost to Australia and the communities impacted by the decisions.

The construct of the questions on what changes are needed to ensure water recovery targets are met is an inappropriate limitation to assess the consequences of the Plan. The framework of questions appears specifically aimed to ensure the full implementation of the Plan with all its documented shortcomings and on-going social and economic consequences.

The Plan needs a full review in 2023 to ensure its development is consistent with the Water Act 2007 objectives to balance social, economic and environmental values. It is critical that an urgent review of the rigidity and manner in which water recovery targets are undertaken to look at if:

- MDBA modelling and Basin Plan flow targets are scientifically valid;
- Southern basin flow targets are physically deliverable;
- Flow targets to the Coorong, Lower Lakes & Murray Mouth (CLLMM) are sustainable in light of new information, including climate change and sea level rise projections, and lessons learnt from the numerous flooding events;
- The deadlines in place to meet milestones of the Plan are hampering the delivery of cost-effective approaches for the environmental outcomes

The narrow nature of this Review of the Basin Plan and its focus on how to ensure water recovery targets are met, does not allow for new knowledge and limits the review to political decisions associated with the Water Act 2007 and Basin Plan.

2750GL Basin Plan (Southern Basin)

The Basin Plan in the southern basin enabled up to 650GL of projects to deliver environmental outcomes. The current score of submitted projects is assessed at 605GL. There is still scope for additional projects to achieve environmental outcomes, potentially reaching the full 650GL Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment allowance. There are however outstanding risks and in turn opportunities that present themselves on the way to completing these projects.

A major supply project considered in the Plan is the Constraints Management Strategies (CMS) affecting NSW Murray and Murrumbidgee Valleys. To date, the delays in achieving implementation of the CMS have initially occurred when under the management in 2013/2014 by the MDBA, as affected landholders did not endorse the higher end flows proposed by the MDBA. These flows were 40,000 ML/day from Hume to Yarrawonga and then downstream of Yarrawonga up to 77,000 ML/day. Key concerns of landholders were the risk of elevated flooding, the flow targets, which were not considered feasible or realistic, and the reasoning as to how these targets were calculated. MDBA-led investigations were confined largely to remote desktop studies of what the potential impacts were likely to be. An advisory committee at the time did not endorse the 2014 report subsequently presented by the MDBA to the federal and state governments.

The NSW government initiated the next version of CMS in 2017, which consequently occurred during a period of NSW departmental restructure. Again, information obtained was largely through the advisory committee and desktop assessments. The process did however result in the advisory committee agreeing to investigate reduced flows up to 30,000 ML/day.

In 2023, the third round of CMS is being rolled out by the NSW government as a State Significant Development, with proposed flows higher than that agreed by stakeholders in 2017. On this basis it is likely that further challenges will occur as the objectives of affected stakeholders and government remain unaligned with the MDBA. This is just another example of how critical it is to work with affected communities to ensure that local knowledge can be incorporated into the decision-making process.

A number of other SDL projects scheduled for implementation were also subject to significant delays through repeat flood events or high flow levels in the Murray and Edward River systems. Another factor affecting the delays were extended Covid restrictions that greatly limited cross-border consultancy that is essential when advancing issues in the southern basin.

It is critical that governments and the MDBA enable an adaptive process for implementation of a Basin Plan that genuinely allows a more comprehensive approach to maximising environmental opportunities in a way that also reduces further risks to disproportionately affected communities. Timeframes also need to be extended to ensure project due diligence and genuine co-design of solutions. It is also a requirement that government continue to fully fund mitigation measures and assess what is achievable under timelines. An example of this is ensuring a key supply projects such as constraints is designed in a way that can maximise community support, which includes reducing the identified flooding risks, and ensuring that flows changes to the Murray and Edward River system are at levels that meet community expectation. A joint report by the NSW and Victorian governments in 2019 into the constraints modelling raised issues around risk, including the lack of impact data and concerns with the modelling process². The report did not extend to any investigation into the elevated flooding risk as consistently flagged by local communities.

450GL Basin Plan

Under the legislation, up to 62 GL is a prerequisite for the SDL Adjustment Mechanism allowance within the 2750GL Basin Plan. Since the passing of the Water Act 2007 and the Basin Plan 2012, there has been significant new information made available on not only the social and economic impacts of the Basin Plan³, but also that flow targets initially set are now deemed unrealistic.

The Plan in its current form continues to cause major concerns in many areas of the Basin. While governments and the MDBA describe the Plan as adaptive there is little evidence of adaptations being made. As new knowledge continues to emerge and original assumptions may need review, there is another opportunity as part of this five-year review to incorporate a much more adaptive way forward. Governments, departments and the MDBA should be encouraged to embrace more collaborative partnerships to achieve wider environmental outcomes in way that maximises uptake and community support, as it is well know that bottom-up policy development is best fit for community engagement.

2.2. Are the current arrangements for implementing the Murray-Darling Basin Plan operating effectively? How could the arrangements be improved? The Commission is particularly interested in the effectiveness of the arrangements for:

- **developing, accrediting and reporting on water resource plans;**
- **water quality;**
- **critical human water needs;**
- **environmental water planning and management.**

² https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/285626/Murray-Darling-Basin-constraints-modelling-report.pdf

³ <https://www.dccew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/panel-report.pdf>

There are significant improvements that can be made to arrangements for implementing the Plan. These proposed improvements have been documented extensively since the first Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan in 2010, again on finalisation of the Basin Plan in 2012, subsequent reviews, Senate Inquiries, and through public consultation. The Plan remains rigid, inflexible and the MDBA continues to reject the need for a more adaptive plan, including any implementation strategies.

This question refers to effectiveness of accrediting and reporting on Water Resource Plans (WRPs). WRPs are assessed against criteria established by the MDBA and the Plan. Simply measuring success against a Basin Plan with imbedded rigidity should not be considered as a valid concept for assessing the merits and accrediting WRPs. It is acknowledged that as NSW WRPs are not all fully completed, this impacts on how the whole Basin Plan is implemented. An important factor to consider is the higher number of WRPs required by NSW compared to other states (20 for NSW, while Queensland, ACT, Victoria and SA combined equals 13). Again, this points to the increased burden that rests with the state of NSW in delivering the Basin Plan.

Numerous submissions, public forums and stakeholder meetings continue to raise concerns that the Plan in its current form is not the most appropriate strategy for achieving water quality objectives, critical human water needs nor the best method of achieving effective environmental water planning and management. The current focus on a volume of water at the Murray Mouth is portrayed as a measure of success, however this ignores all the risks in the MDBA methodology for assessing success – a volume of water measured at a particular point.

Marketing of monitoring programs to underpin the success of decisions is not accompanied by a comprehensive assessment or any associated risks or adverse environmental impacts. A concentration of water recovery and its delivery on the Murray River is having major negative impacts on riverbank integrity leading to erosion, bank slumping in the Murray & Edward Rivers, movement of sand slugs, and a decline in river capacity.

The Plan is also driving a boom-and-bust approach to how the Murray/Edward/Wakool Rivers system will be managed in future. The last couple of years has seen flow volumes remain high through spring, which coincided with La Nina conditions of high rainfall across southern NSW and northern Victoria, resulting in increased flooding risk due to storage and delivery of environmental water during these times. Concentrated storage and untimely delivery of environmental water creates elevated flooding risks, major elevation in transmission and spread of weeds, damage to trees and riverbanks. Accompanied by this is the lack of evaluation of major social and economic consequences due to these events occurring more frequently.

There needs to be continued focus on ensuring that balance is maintained between the northern and southern basins, of which an essential part is connectivity flows of the Darling River into Menindee Lakes and then through into the Lower Darling River. Any proposal that looks to reduce water storage in Menindee Lakes needs thorough examination and community input to safeguard against any social and economic impacts to all stakeholders.

2.3. Have the governance and institutional arrangements for the Plan – including the arrangements for compliance and monitoring, evaluation and reporting – proved effective? What changes would you recommend?

Stakeholder groups have continually called for full and robust transparency on monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Plan. These communities have appealed to authorities to include both positive and negatives findings in any associated monitoring or reporting but there is insufficient evidence this is being taken on board. There can be lessons learnt from both positive and negative findings; however, these need to be made public and available so stakeholders can provide feedback.

As the authority over the Plan, the MDBA appears rigid and unwilling to adapt its own structure let alone that of the Plan. While out of scope for this review, the same could be said for the NSW departments and agencies

tasked with implementing the Plan. The lack of capacity within the state authorities is seen on the ground in the form of poor consultation and ongoing concerns that local knowledge is not factored into decision making. These concerns about the MDBA were highlighted in a report to the Victorian and NSW Ministers' by an independent expert panel into the Murray Darling basin SDL adjustment mechanism (2017)⁴. The report found that not only was there a trust deficit between the MDBA and the state jurisdictions regarding the benchmark model used to determine the SDL adjustment mechanism, but also that there is limited transparency about how the model is used. This is a clear example of how governance and opportunity for evaluation of the Plan is ineffective, from all layers of institutions involved. It is therefore critical that the MDBA and state authorities actively work to enhance transparency with their decision making and balance out the focus on modelling with on-the-ground knowledge so as to create a Plan that delivers on fairer outcomes for communities.

2.4. How well is the Plan responding to a changing climate? How should this be improved?

In responding to this question, it is important to recognise how water management occurs across the Basin. In regulated river systems, such as the southern basin, there are existing provisions that allow water authorities to managed drought, floods and any future climate risks. If, however there is an expectation that future management or new policies relating to the Plan should create further protections for modelled risks of climate change with the current focus on reduced inflows, then this poses significant further risks for affected communities and agricultural production.

It is critically important to understand the current cautionary approach to annual inflow changes, drought and water sharing and allocations in the southern basin regulated system. The Plan already contains provisions for managing drought, floods and future changes to inflows. In regulated systems, annual allocations are made based on a range of factors, including inflows, water in storage, and state sharing arrangements, to ensure water is shared with all users. To preserve additional water to account for future climate modelling ignores the practical capacities of existing major storage dams in the southern basin and the current cautionary nature of water allocations. The structure and implementation of SDLs is in place to manage these exact scenarios and decide how water is shared among users. There is significant concern that if more water is diverted from the consumptive pool, the production of food and fibre will continue to be constrained and with that the flow-on economic and social impacts on regional communities.

2.5. How well is the Plan addressing the interests of Aboriginal people?

It is important to acknowledge the connection between First Nations peoples and the Murray-Darling Basin. As it is not within the scope of our Association to comment on this question in detail, we will continue to support the involvement of First Nations peoples with the Plan as a significant stakeholder.

2.6. How well has community consultation and engagement been conducted? How can this be improved?

Strong evidence exists in NSW on best methods for achieving on ground success with Natural Resource Management Programs. Successful projects share key elements, which includes:

- Collaborative partnerships developed for long term sustainability or environmental outcomes, often involving farmers or industry groups, governments and scientists working to co-design ideas and programs.
- Trust is a key element for underpinning successful relationships and program outcomes.
- Valuing local knowledge is integral to maintaining collaborative partnerships.

⁴ https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/148228/Murray-Darling-Basin-SDL-Adjustment-Mechanism-Report-by-the-Victorian-and-NSW-Ministers-Independent-Expert-Panel.PDF

- Measuring success of such programs goes beyond the shorter-term program life or after initial funding has ceased.
- The capacity for on-site access for ongoing research/monitoring during and following the formal components of the program.

As already highlighted several times through this submission, community consultation and engagement has not been conducted well. Development of the Plan is not consistent with examples of collaborative partnerships nor valuing of local knowledge. Although consultation has occurred throughout the number of years the Plan was developed and implemented, it has not met regional communities' expectations. And despite requests for alternative consultation approaches, little has changed. Community or stakeholder consultation is generally assumed by participants to be a box-ticking exercise and with little result for attendance effort. Since 2010, substantial community, stakeholder organisations and private resources of individuals have contributed through submissions, public meetings and online forums. Despite this, there is little evidence of those processes actually influencing decisions of government and the MDBA.

2.7. What lessons should be learned from programs aimed at helping communities adjust to the Plan?

Development of the Basin Plan has had disproportional impacts on regional communities. This is not just public perception but is confirmed by the MDBA social & economic reports and further confirmed by numerous consultants' reports commissioned by affected communities. The question remains whether recommendations for the Productivity Commission's own review in 2018 have made any progress.

Ongoing discussions about the capacity of communities to adjust to the Basin Plan varies across regions.

- For example, a major city centre might have enough alternative industries or employment opportunities whereas smaller regions may not.
- Future industry investment opportunities in a region might be limited by issues such as energy availability, location to transport routes or availability of supporting services.
- There is limited evidence to the assumptions that substantive impacts to the economic base of a region can be replaced by alternate industries and real life, successful examples of this are limited.

Structural adjustment is often the preferred method that governments rely on to overcome social and economic impacts, but these tend to be political solution as opposed to solutions for agriculture or regional communities. Structural adjustment packages payments related to the Plan often went to visual community outcomes, like playgrounds, sports halls, and other investments that did not drive jobs or economic growth. Early rounds of structural adjustment did fund individuals, some of whom may or may not have been impacted by the decisions or even lived in the area. In subsequent rounds, impacted individuals were told they were ineligible. There is also conflicting information and expectations. Structural adjustment announcements give the impression people impacted will receive an element of funding to help them adjust, however subsequent information confirms funding programs are not designed for individuals impacted by the decisions. There is also division between irrigation communities and riparian communities in regard to eligibility of programs.

2.8. Does the implementation of the Plan reflect a commitment to the best available scientific knowledge? How well is this knowledge communicated? What improvements should be made?

Since 2010, the issue of best available science remains a major impediment to the success of this current Plan. The term 'best available' can be viewed through a variety of lenses, and some examples are expanded on below.

An example of 'best available' is the underlying science of the Sustainable Rivers Audit.

- Commissioned by the former Murray Darling Basin Commission ministerial council, the SRA was to be a series of three reports, the first being assessed during the peak of the Millennium Drought (2006 and 2007).
- Subsequent second and third reports were not done, while the first, which assessed river health during the worst year of a protracted and devastating 10-year drought, is not consistent with the term ‘best available science’ and does not help build community confidence in decisions.

The Plan set specific flow targets to the Coorong, Lower Lakes & Murray Mouth (CLLMM) of 2000GL over a three-year rolling average.

- These targets for the CLLMM are unique in that they are prescriptive and controlled by under the term ‘limits of change’. This means that any decision in the Plan is constrained by the limits of change rules that ensure that the flow objectives for the CLLMM cannot be amended.
- The Plan flow targets to address political imperatives for the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth did not adequately consider historical information that was documented and made available to the MDBA.

Again, this highlights the need to move away from volume-based targets to outcomes-based targets. Outcomes-based targets will provide greater security to both environmental and social goals within the Plan.

MDBA documents also utilised a historical map of the Murray-Darling Basin. This map was not inclusive of South- East of South Australia, the natural watershed catchment of the Coorong.

- The Plan includes the Southern Coorong and sets very specific flow targets and ecological conditions that the plan must meet, not from the South-East of South Australia, but instead water sourced from upstream states, with delivery primarily from Southern Basin major dams on the Murray River.
- The Plan ‘end of system’ flow targets to the CLLMM primarily rely on increased flows down the Murray River primarily from major Southern Basin headwater storages.
- The Plan does not require ‘end of system’ flow targets to Menindee Lakes nor connectivity flows to the Murray. This is further endorsed by MDBA approvals of NSW and Queensland Water Sharing Plans which cumulatively result in a requirement of no more than 200ML/day target at Wilcannia.

As noted already, the Plan was established during the Millennium drought which had clear influence over much of the strategy of the implementation. While it is essential that climatic influences like drought are considered, it is equally important to include new information on rainfall trends that have developed over the years since the Millennium drought, and how these trends are playing out on the ground with inflows in the northern basin in particular.

2.9. Are there any other issues with Plan implementation that you wish to raise?

Constraints Management Strategies

Constraints relaxation projects are expected to affect over 6,000 landholders across the southern basin, with 3,000-4,000 in NSW alone, and will take years to complete negotiations with individuals. The MDBA proposed higher flows rate, which currently account for the higher scoring as an SDL offset project, is not supported by affected parties. There are legitimate concerns from affected landholders regarding the significant risks of elevating and extending flooding risks in specific areas. Riparian landholders have strong reservations on fairness and equity of the projects, and this is exacerbated by the federal and state government’s current position that limits compensation and has specifically excluded elevated flooding risks.

Earlier in 2023, NSW Farmers Association’s Executive Council passed two motions that specifically addressed the current legislation that restricts liability of the Crown in relation to just terms compensation, and also requires that flooding risks are compensable under these projects. There is a greater chance of support for these projects from affected stakeholders if all concerns are incorporated into decisions and the risks are appropriately managed.

NSW Farmers Association supports community concerns about the MDBA's high flow targets for the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers, unresolved concerns on elevated flooding risks to affected regions and program failures that are not consistent with 'Just Terms' provisions. Major concerns include:

- Reconnecting Rivers Country Program has major exclusions to compensation.
- There is no clarity for landholders subject to funding and compensation limitations under the Mid-Murray Anabranches Project and the Reconnecting River Country Program.
- A critical component of risk is that landholders will be required to sign off on easement agreements whereby governments are excluded automatically from any liability for water authorities' actions under the 'good faith' clause in the NSW Water Act 2000 (2018 amendment).
- It is urgent that federal and state governments and the MDBA address flooding risks and how they intend to achieve their 'good faith' exclusions. This will be a critical issue and, if not developed to acceptable resolutions, will hamper program progression.
- Previous attempts by the MDBA, federal and NSW governments to recognise the severity of risks and unresolved issues have led to previous programs failures. This includes constraints measures programs initially managed by the MDBA and then subsequently the NSW government.

Water policy changes

Water policy in the Basin has undergone major policy changes over the years, with significant influences on implementation of the Plan. Some of these include:

- The separation of land and water, which has resulted in changes to water use patterns, and where market demands and speculators have influenced how and when water is used or traded.
- Timing of allocation announcements, which has impacted on irrigation farmers' ability to forward plan and make timely decisions regarding cropping opportunities.

In both the northern and southern Basins, following the recent years of high rainfall, it has become clear that the current modelling based on the NSW Floodplain Management Plans is not accurate, and that significant variations in water flow intensity, duration and depth are occurring to modelled outcomes. The floodplain management planning process is not aligned with the needs of local communities and there is a low level of trust in the process. It is essential that federal and state governments prioritise engagement with affected communities and develop a strategy that allows input into the process to ensure transparency.

Social and economic impacts

Since the passing of the Water Act 2007 and finalisation of the Plan in 2012, new information and reviews of past assumptions need to be incorporated as part of an adaptive Basin Plan. These include but are not limited to:

- recognition of environmental outcomes already achieved with a range of pre and Basin Plan water recovery strategies to date;
- post Millennium Drought conditions of the Murray Darling Basin;
- lessons learnt from post drought floods affecting the Murray, Goulburn, Murrumbidgee and Darling Rivers.

New information has also emerged regarding social and economic assumptions that were deemed to be neutralised as described in the Plan's 2750GL Regulatory Impact Statement (2012)⁵. The RIS assumed that social and economic impacts would largely be offset through how governments would obtain water, be it through buybacks, on-farm efficiency programs or through the SDL Adjustment Mechanism projects. However, the RIS did not adequately consider the extent of impacts to irrigators, irrigation-dependent communities, and did not consider a range of other stakeholders at all. This includes:

- Impacts on riparian landholders, tourism, and town amenities and businesses as a result of Basin Plan objectives to amend regulated conditions of the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Goulburn Rivers

⁵ <https://oia.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/posts/2012/11/03-Murray-Darling-Basin-Plan-RIS.pdf>

- How Basin Plan objectives and other cumulative changes to water policy is elevating regional flooding risks in the Southern Basin
- How SDL Projects such as the Constraints Management Strategy would be rolled out and that not all impacts would be mitigated or compensated
- Acknowledgement of adverse impacts of sustained high flow damage to the natural river banks of Murray & Edward River system and Goulburn Rivers in the Southern Basin
- Impacts to the Lower Darling as a result of SDL projects such as the Menindee Lakes project

Again, if the social and economic impacts on regional and rural communities are not fully assessed, and implementation of the Plan continues as is, there is significant risk on the future of food and fibre production and supply across the state that carries the greatest burden in this Plan.

Management of water in and releases from storage dams

We have seen over the last several years that concentration of water recovery in the headwaters of the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers is already leading to increases in flooding risk affecting the farming sector and regional towns. Major storages in the southern basin are now again entering spring with full supply. This can be attributed to high levels of carryover, a concentration of environmental water recovery in the Murray and Murrumbidgee Valleys, and Goulburn Valley Eildon storage. There are air space rules that the relevant managers of these storages can use to mitigate against these flooding risks, however it appears that these rules have not been utilised nor was sufficient communication to downstream communities. The increased flooding risks is real and should be a key factor in acknowledging storage limitation of the major southern basin dams, and the physical limitations of the Murray, Murrumbidgee & Goulburn Rivers. Recognition is required to understand the cumulative impacts of major changes in how these southern basin storages are being managed as a result of water policy changes and the MDBP water recovery targets. Continual, high level flows is already having major negative impacts on riverbank integrity leading to erosion, bank slumping in the Murray & Edward/Wakool Rivers system, movement of sand deposits, and a decline in river capacity.

3. Conclusion

In answering the key questions asked as part of this review, a key theme throughout has been the clear evidence that communities, particularly rural and regional ones, continue to be left behind as the implementation of the Plan rolls on. It is critical that for a successful Basin Plan to evolve, the social, economic and environmental outcomes of affected communities be at the centre of decision making. The significant environmental outcomes already achieved so far are worthwhile of celebrating. The next step is to navigate a way forward through the noted failings that avoids the need for more buy backs, and continues to work with all water users on a collaborative Basin Plan that is adaptable for current and future challenges.

4. Attachments

- NSW Farmers Association submission to DCCEEW 'Public consultation on ideas to deliver the Basin Plan' - 3 July 2023