

Sustainable Use of Water and the Murray Darling Basin Plan

Policy Paper

Introduction / Background

The sustainable use of water across Australia and specifically in the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) has become one of the foremost critical issues for Australia and Australian agriculture during the past decade, since the MDB plan was released, and particularly as the drought has intensified during 2019.

Over the last century, while the *weather* patterns (e.g. droughts, floods, fires) in the MDB have largely remained the same, the MDB *climate* has gradually become hotter and drier and this trend is continuing. This is putting more energy into the weather systems which in turn, are becoming more intense, such as those impacting upon the current bushfires in south eastern Australia, which are on an unprecedented scale.

The science informs us that the MDB river system, historically, has gone through natural wet and dry cycles. The science also informs us that we are experiencing greater extremes in the climate in the MDB. For the plan and its implementation to maintain its triple bottom line commitments, it will need to be modified on an ongoing basis to account for the ongoing changes in our climate. Such wetting and drying cycles will continue so all users must become more resilient and efficient with such a finite resource to ensure it is sustainably managed for the triple bottom line.

Problem Statement

The implementation of the MDB plan has seen significant changes in redistribution of water entitlements and a significant movement of these downstream resulting in community and end-user friction and an apparent over-drawing of stream allocations. The impact of continued expansion in downstream irrigation communities has not considered the knock-on effect (of this economic development) to determine the required water that would actually need to be delivered, once these developments reached peak demand. The rivers' current capacity at the key chokes cannot deliver such allocations, so the plan has diverged from its original intent of sustainability. It has become apparent that the outcomes of the plan have strayed from its key primary vision of sustainability – that is, a “healthy working basin”.

With both the climate and the weather having changed and continuing to change, how must we, as stewards of the MDB, adjust our management prescriptions for the MDB to enable its ongoing sustainable use?

Objectives

The vision of the plan is for a “healthy working basin” that supports strong and vibrant communities, resilient industries, including food and fibre, as well as a healthy environment. The purpose of the

plan was to take a balanced adaptive approach to water management, with a commitment to optimise social, economic and environmental outcomes, i.e. to deliver on the triple bottom line.

The objective of this policy is to support a science-based approach to ensuring the equitable use of water in the MDB to each of the stakeholders and environmental applications, and to advocate for the development and implementation of the most effective policy instruments to ensure water equity is achieved.

Although this policy is focused on the MDB, the principles applied are relevant for all water ecosystems and the communities reliant upon such systems, thus the AIA's objective is in support of sustainable water management and use.

Analysis of Issues and Options

Critical policy questions and issues for consideration are raised as follows:

- Is meeting the requirements of a triple bottom line clearly articulated sufficiently enough within the plan?
- Should the environment come before our social and economic requirements?
- Should social and economic needs come before those of the environment?

Consideration needs to be given to how to plan for changing, expanding and introducing new agricultural enterprises in the MDB (or within any river ecosystem). Advice given and decisions taken by AIA members should be driven from a sustainability perspective that takes into account the key message of a triple bottom line.

The AIA advocates that the definition of sustainable use of water be revisited so that communities, primary producers and natural environment obtain an equitable outcome. The AIA supports the principle of reviewing elements of the plan and adjusting regulatory instruments arising from it as the climate changes and demands upon water uses change. The AIA advocates that water use policies and interventions, arising from the MDB plan, are considered on a holistic, and not a localised, isolated or on a short-term basis.

The AIA and its members, in the course of their work, need to ask the right questions to ensure all aspects of decisions (if these are within the MDB or any other ecosystem), to account for social, economic and environmental outcomes. This should be done such that meeting one objective, or a short-term goal, does not impact another key outcome, in the medium- or even long-term. We as members of the AIA, will consider sustainable water use in all our dealings with clients. Such an approach is consistent with our Code of Ethics (Section 4) where the AIA and members commit to the following:

- *Engage responsibly with the community and other stakeholders a) be sensitive to public concerns, b) inform employers or clients of the likely consequences of proposed activities on the community and the environment, c) promote the involvement of all stakeholders and the community in decisions and processes that may impact upon them, such as amenity and values, and the environment*
- *Practise professional agriculture to foster the health, safety and wellbeing of the community and the environment, and incorporate social, cultural, health, safety, environmental and economic considerations into the professional agriculture task*

- *Balance the needs of the present with the needs of future generations, a) in identifying sustainable outcomes consider all options in terms of their economic, environmental and social consequences, b) aim to deliver outcomes that do not compromise the ability of future life to enjoy the same or better environment, health, wellbeing and safety as currently enjoyed, c) promote market widening in agriculture and awareness of customer requirements, d) advocate diversified agricultural practices, and awareness of market players beyond commodity supply chains and corporate vertical integration models.*

Policy Recommendations

The key policy recommendations are as follows:

- It is the AIA's view that the MDB plan should be supported. This should be done in the manner in which the plan's original intent was meant – that is, water is used in a sustainable, triple bottom line manner.
- The AIA acknowledges the responsibility of its members to advise, consult and advocate in a manner that ensures sustainable outcomes for the MDB and its stakeholders.
- This AIA advocates and supports its members to take personal responsibility for being informed of the issues related to sustainable water use and to understand ethical dimensions of water use.
- To support achieving the above policy recommendations, the AIA has published and communicated to members and its stakeholders, a Code of Ethics which sets out expected behaviours in relation to resource use, including water, and to behave according to the needs of multiple and sometimes conflicting stakeholders.

Recommended Readings

- Basin Plan 2012 made under subparagraph 44(3)(b)(i) of the Water Act 2007 Compilation No. 6 Compilation (3 July 2018)

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