

Murray Darling Basin Plan: Implementation Review 2023

Submission

This submission is made on behalf of the Australian River Restoration Centre's (ARRC) team, as well as the rivers, wetlands, creeks and billabongs, we work to protect and restore alongside Basin communities.

We support the Basin Plan and believe ongoing investment in the objectives it seeks to achieve is vital for the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin to survive, and hopefully thrive, now and into the future. To date, the Basin Plan has improved the health of some wetlands and rivers through the implementation of water sharing plans and the delivery of water for the environment. We believe that implementation of the Basin Plan needs to continue, and that the commitment of the Federal Government, Basin States and the Territory, to achieving Basin Plan objectives must be unwavering and steadfast.

As part of consortia working to research and share knowledge about how we can protect and restore the health of the Murray-Darling Basin, we support ongoing funding being allocated to both the biophysical and social sciences (for example, Flow-Monitoring Evaluation Research (flow-mer.org.au)). We also believe more resources need to be allocated for meaningful First Nations involvement in decision making, moving from simply engaging with First Nations Peoples in certain projects and areas, to facilitating active participation in planning and implementation.

Going forward, we need to build on the strengths of what has been achieved by the Basin Plan and refine, where possible, those areas that are not working well. We require a renewed and explicit commitment to the objectives of the Basin Plan by our Federal, State and Territory governments, so that Basin communities can have confidence the changes they have experienced to date are worthwhile - for the environment that sustains them, as well as for their economic, cultural, and social wellbeing.

We have chosen one key issue to focus our attention on in this submission, as it is a glaring gap in the implementation of the Basin Plan, and one that we feel must be rectified. The Upper Murrumbidgee River is part of the Murray-Darling Basin, and flows from the Snowy Mountains, through Cooma, Canberra, and Yass, before rejoining the main river below Burrinjuck Dam. **This 320 km stretch of river has been completely ignored by the Basin Plan reforms and is in severe decline.** Further detail on the current issues faced by the Upper Murrumbidgee River can be found on this website 'The Forgotten River' (www.theforgottenriver.au), developed by the ARRC to raise awareness of this issue.

The current NSW Water Sharing Plan classifies the Upper Murrumbidgee River as unregulated – a bizarre classification given the presence of the Snowy Hydro operated Tantangara Dam, at the top of the river system. Dam operations mean that the Upper Murrumbidgee receives just 1-10% of its inflows, critically impacting the ability of the river to maintain its health, as well as its cultural, social and economic benefits. This river used to be magnificent, with deep pools, waterfalls, and diverse populations of native fish, birds and vegetation. First Nations connections to the river were strong, with the waterway being an important pathway and home to many sites of significance. Despite sustained action by local groups and organisations like the ARRC, South-east Local Land Services and the Upper Murrumbidgee Demonstration Reach, the degraded state of this environmentally and culturally significant waterway is an indictment on current management arrangements.

The Basin Plan seeks a better balance between economic, cultural, environmental and social outcomes, yet the Upper Murrumbidgee and the other montane rivers impacted by Snowy Hydro, are still operated almost entirely for economic and energy purposes. A requirement in the Commonwealth Water Act 2007 that the Basin Plan be consistent with the operations of Snowy Hydro, has meant there has been little incentive for the Murray-Darling Basin Authority or NSW Government to pursue reform. Given the degraded state of the Snowy, Upper Murrumbidgee and other montane rivers, this Basin Plan Implementation review is an opportunity to re-examine Snowy Hydro operations so that they align with wider Basin reforms.

The Snowy Water Outcomes Implementation Deed (2002) which governs Snowy Hydro operations has not been reviewed, and is not scheduled to be reviewed, despite being over 20 years old. This means that all the positive outcomes being achieved through the implementation of Basin Plan and associated water reforms are not being applied to Snowy and montane rivers like the Upper Murrumbidgee, resulting in a glaring absence on the map of Basin Plan improvements. In 2018, a review of the Snowy Water License, which gives effect to the provisions of the Snowy Water Outcomes Implementation Deed was undertaken, however, town water supply and the volumes of water available to the environment were ruled out of scope, with no reason given as to why this was the case.

Water is a key, yet limiting resource required for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and surrounding region to grow, and options for further water capture in the ACT are rapidly disappearing. The call upon water from centres such as Bungendore, Sutton, Murrumbateman and Yass are growing, and the Upper Murrumbidgee is part of the ACT's water supply for critical human needs. At present, the quality of the water in the Upper Murrumbidgee means that it would require extensive treatment before consumptive use is possible. Predicted figures of up to 700,000 people in the Capital region (currently 472,000), combined with the uncertainties of climate change, highlights the importance of being able to access sufficient quality and quantity of water from the Upper Murrumbidgee.

Similarly, the limited amount of water allocated for environmental flows in the Upper Murrumbidgee is unprotected, with irrigators and towns like Cooma able to access flows. When environmental flows are provided, there is very little flexibility, with no carry-over, limited-to-almost no active or adaptive management, allocations based on previous water year in-flows (out of sync with natural cues), and water use traded off against other rivers

(impacting one river by taking flows to try and help another river). We have one of the last wild populations of the endangered Macquarie Perch in the Upper Murrumbidgee and we have an obligation to try and prevent this fish from becoming extinct.

That this situation has been allowed to develop in the Upper Murrumbidgee is part of a wider problem which sees the ACT and surrounding region being inadequately engaged and included in Murray-Darling Basin Plan decision making. Community engagement from Federal agencies has largely missed the ACT and surrounding region – despite Canberra being the largest city within the Murray-Darling Basin. For example, the closest face to face consultation opportunity for this Implementation Review is Griffith in NSW, a more than four-hour trip from Canberra.

This submission emphasises that we are not asking to make a good river better, we are asking for a river in poor and declining condition to be recovered in line with expectations under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

As stated previously, the ARRC supports the implementation of the Basin Plan, as all our rivers and wetlands need to be restored if they are to continue to provide the range of environmental, social, economic and cultural benefits we rely upon. At ARRC, we believe that rivers and people need each other to thrive. The Upper Murrumbidgee, Snowy and montane rivers warrant our attention, and need to be brought under the Basin Plan in order to be brought back to health. We welcome the opportunity to talk further with you about our submission.

Yours sincerely,

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Managing Director

10th July 2023