

AUSTRALIA REMARKS

Working Group on Integrated Water Resources Management, Eighteenth meeting

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Thankyou for this opportunity for Australia to offer a remark in this part of the program focused on supporting equitable and sustainable water allocation in a transboundary context.

I've two (2) key points to share.

Renewing Australia's National Water Initiative ¹

The new Australian Government elected in 2022 has committed to work with states and territories to renew our National Water Initiative, created in 2004 and due for re-examination.

The 2004 initiative has provided us an overall framework and principles that have underpinned our subsequent water reform efforts.

Implementation of a renewed NWI will underpin water security for every water user in Australia, from private citizens to First Nations peoples, to industries such as agriculture and mining.

It will promote the sustainable use of Australia's water resources and work to ensure there is enough water to keep our environment healthy

Principles in a renewed NWI will also contribute towards improved outcomes for intersecting issues such as health, energy and urban liveability.

¹ https://www.dcceew.gov.au/water/policy/policy/nwi#toc_2

Roadmap to the 2026 Murray Darling Basin Plan Review²

Of direct relevance to equitable and sustainable water allocation in a transboundary context, my second point is to update you on the state of play in Australia's Murray Darling Basin.

The introduction of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan in 2012 was a recognition that past attempts to share the water had not worked. A new whole-of-Basin approach was needed to manage the Basin's water resources in the national interest, including to meet Australia's international obligations. The Basin Plan is a significant water reform that has attracted interest from around the world.

The Plan was created to improve the health of the Murray-Darling Basin, and in doing so continue to support agriculture, other industries and the environment for the benefit of the Australian community. The Basin Plan sets the amount of water that can be taken from the Basin each year, while leaving enough for rivers, lakes and wetlands that plants and animals depend on.

We're now preparing for the 2026 Basin Plan Review. This review isn't about starting again, instead it's about being responsive to the impacts of climate change, seeing what's working and what's needed to best protect the Basin and its values for the future.

The Basin Plan Review will be focused on 4 key themes: climate change, sustainable water limits, First Nations, and regulatory design.

Over the next 3 years we will gather and share the knowledge that captures the value we place on the Murray-Darling Basin - the social, economic, environmental and cultural value of the rivers and towns, the farms and the wetlands of the Basin.

All good ideas welcome!

Thankyou for your attention.

² <https://www.mdba.gov.au/sites/default/files/pubs/bpr-review-A5-landscape-webpage.pdf>

ANNEX

A transcript of Sir Angus Houston's address to the River reflections conference in Narrabri: Roadmap to the 2026 Basin Plan Review

[Sir Angus is the Chair of the Murray Darling Basin Authority]

[Sir Angus Houston address – River reflections 2023 | Murray-Darling Basin Authority \(mdba.gov.au\)](#)

Good morning and thank you

I would like to start by acknowledging that we meet today on the lands of the First Peoples of Gomeri Nations. I recognise their continuing connection to this land and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I extend that respect to any First Nations people here today.

I also acknowledge and pay respects to the First Nations people throughout the Murray–Darling Basin. I respect and acknowledge their deep connection to the lands and waters.

Earlier this month, I noticed the Bureau of Meteorology forecast very dry and warmer conditions for most of Australia later this year.

The Bureau is also predicting the likelihood of a positive Indian Ocean Dipole and a return to El Nino.

Our climate, its variance and its changes is about to challenge us again.

In the early 1980s I lived in Utah, and flew as a rescue helicopter pilot along and over the rivers in the Colorado Basin.

I was deeply shocked by Anne Castle and Professor LeRoy Poff's presentations yesterday, on what has happened to this stunning river system.

Climate change, continuous overuse, a huge water balance deficit, with two mighty lakes almost run dry.

Seven state water jurisdictions, and no Federal Government authority or oversight.

No environmental water.

No PLAN.

So where would we be without the MURRAY–DARLING BASIN PLAN?

The complex river system of the Murray–Darling Basin has been a source of life and connection for thousands of years.

Today, it's home to well-over 2 million Australians.

Its signature is embedded in our national identity – our songs and stories, the food on our tables and clothes on our backs, the rivers and wildlife that are unique in Australia and the world.

Just over 10 years ago, the Australian Government, and the governments of NSW, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the ACT, signed off on a world-leading commitment to a healthy future for this, our nation's most important river system.

It was the first time we had a plan for the Murray–Darling Basin as a whole connected system, from the top of the Warrego and the Condamine to where the Murray meets the Southern Ocean.

And throughout the past 10 years, it's been our job, the MDBA's job, to work with you - the people who live and work in the Basin to see it through. We must deliver the current Plan.

We must implement the Plan in full so all its moving parts can work together to full effect.

More than ever, implementing the Basin Plan is crucial for giving our rivers the best chance.

Basin Plan Review

In 2026 will be the time to take stock.

In 2026 we will conduct a full-scale review to test if the Basin Plan will meet our needs into the future.

This will be a once in a decade opportunity – in the interests of the nation. The national interest.

So today, I am very pleased to launch the Roadmap that will get us there – the Roadmap to the 2026 Basin Plan Review [hold up roadmap brochure].

The roadmap steps through each critical phase of work over the next 3 years, which will ensure the Review is built on sound, defensible foundations.

So, what's on the road ahead?

Over the next 3 years we will gather and share the knowledge that captures the value we place on the Basin -the social, economic, environmental and cultural value of the rivers and towns, the farms and the wetlands of the Basin.

This means updating our science and the lived experiences of people like you here today.

This is my commitment to you – a review of the Basin Plan, based on the best science and information and with a view to the future.

At every step of this journey the door will be open to you, for your perspective and ideas.

We will listen to First Nations people of the Basin and continue to learn from their deep connection to the land and water.

We will confront the issue of climate change at every turn.

We will make recommendations based on science and evidence.

We know that takes patience, but it works.

Think back 30 years ago to the alarming salinity levels in the Murray River. Water quality concerns threatened livelihoods and river ecosystems. Guided by science and steady persistent collaboration, today salinity levels are under control.

Think back 20 years ago, in the face of the Millennium Drought. Governments decided to take the long-term view and protect natural icons through The Living Murray Program. That program continues to this day, led by the science, guided by First Nations knowledge and supported by river communities.

And 10 years ago, the Basin Plan began.

Fundamentals

The foundation of the Basin Plan is about balance.

Setting limits on the amount of water that can be taken from the rivers and groundwater each year to provide a sustainable future for communities, the environment and industry.

There's no denying that change is hard.

We recognise for some communities setting those limits in the Basin Plan has been extremely hard.

People have expressed to me their fear for the future of their communities and their uncertainty about what's to come.

The onus is on all of us to leave a healthy river system that is fit to support future generations, as it has supported us and previous generations.

The challenge will always be with us.

That's why I believe it is essential that we work together.

I invite you to be part of the journey to 2026, when we will propose to governments the appropriate settings to achieve that healthy river system.

How will you be involved?

The Review will need to consider the lived experience, traditional and community knowledge, economic impacts and perspectives from Toowoomba to Tamworth, Tumut to Tailem Bend.

How we manage the Basin's water resources not only effects everyone who lives and works in the Basin, but all of Australia.

40% of Australia's farms are in the Basin. The Basin contributes \$22 billion to Australia's agricultural economy and \$11 billion in tourism.

It supports a network of ecosystems found nowhere else in the world.

This is why we need the knowledge and experience of you and your communities to take us all forward.

We will ensure there are opportunities for everyone who wants a voice to be heard - not just by decision makers, but by each other.

And for our part, the MDBA is committed to sharing what we learn.

Our commitment to transparency includes reporting every six months on the work underway.

Evidence, shared knowledge, and a shared understanding will give us the confidence to step forward.

On the roadmap for the next 3 years, we'll be following 4 themes: climate change, sustainable water limits, First Nations people and regulatory design.

Let's take them one at a time.

Climate change

First, to climate change.

The future is uncertain, but climate change will undeniably be a key element of the Basin Plan Review.

I want you to contemplate this: when a child born today is my age, it will be the year 2100.

In the 2090s, according to the latest report of the International Panel on Climate Change, this child is likely to step out that door into temperatures higher than today and encounter extreme weather events – floods, droughts, fires, extreme heat, storms – more and more frequent than today. And a higher demand for water.

We already have these scenarios as the backdrop to the Basin, we're already living with it, but the future possibilities are what we have to prepare for.

The CSIRO has developed several plausible scenarios describing possible impacts on our rivers and groundwater.

One CSIRO scenario – perhaps the most plausible – shows river-flow falling by 20 to 30 percent.

This is why we have to plan ahead, so the future doesn't overtake us.

Sustainable water limits

This brings me to the second theme to the Basin Plan Review – Sustainable Water limits.

We limit the amount of water that can be taken from the rivers as an essential part of sharing this finite resource – it's the basis of the Basin Plan.

The rationale for water limits must be underpinned by science, along with consideration of lived experience, social and economic impacts and how we operate our rivers.

The roadmap to the Basin Plan Review includes points along the way to test current settings and to consider if change is needed.

It will also allow us to consider other sustainability models that can achieve a healthy river environment, beyond water volume alone.

It's a conversation I'm sure many of you will be keen to be part of.

First Nations

The next theme is how the knowledge, values and desired outcomes for First Nations people can be better identified and incorporated in the Basin Plan.

Around 100,000 First Nations people live in the Murray–Darling Basin, as generations have done for thousands of years.

And for thousands of years, the role of water, rivers, billabongs and creeks and the creatures that are part of them, has been all around us in our place names. They still are today.

The deep significance of First Nations' knowledge passed down over the generations is ever more pressing and more precious as our environment changes.

Through the Basin Plan Review we can investigate better ways for water management to be guided by this knowledge.

Regulatory Design

Finally, regulatory design – talking about water, it's a very dry theme.

But this is where the rules come in, that give us trust and confidence that we're playing on a fair pitch throughout the Basin.

The Basin Plan is about setting us all up to succeed – providing you with the information you need to continue doing what you do, while abiding by the necessary rules.

The Review will look at how regulation has worked to date and investigate whether the Basin Plan framework can be simplified.

Is it clear and easily understood or can we improve compliance by redesigning parts of the Plan that may be confusing or too complex?

Science

In closing, I'm going to return to science.

I can't stress enough the dependence of this roadmap on working hand-in-hand with science and consultation.

By continually investing in the right research, we will develop a clear picture of what's needed for the Basin into the 2030s.

I am excited by the several research programs that are already gathering new, inspiring, and practical information – strategic and in-depth assessments of our water resources, such as The Murray–Darling Water and Environment Research Program, the Sustainable Yields Study and The Sustainable Rivers Audit.

Conclusion

2026 is just around the corner.

We haven't got a moment to lose.

That's why I'm delighted to present to you today the roadmap ahead.

The Basin Plan Review is not a starting point, but a moment in time where we can reflect on our past actions to inform our future.

Any recommendations that follow the review, including possible amendments to the Basin Plan, will be directed to the Commonwealth water minister to meet the challenges ahead.

That's why today I invite you to join us on the journey.

It is why we are putting our skills, knowledge and time into addressing one of the most complex questions facing Australia, and the world – water for the future.

We all share a common goal – to protect the Murray–Darling Basin for future generations – as individuals, as communities, as a nation.

None of us can do this alone.

I encourage you to add your voice to this conversation which will shape Australia's most important river system for future generations.

Rivers for generations. It is our shared purpose.

Thank you.