

Murray-Darling Basin Plan up for Review



We are now at a critical time to improve the protection of inland river and wetland health, the future of First Nations cultural connections to land and water and the ongoing existence of native water dependent birds, animals and fish.

In 2012 a world first in water management was adopted by the Australian Government in the form of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan across five state and territory jurisdictions: Queensland, NSW, ACT, Victorian and South Australia. \$13 billion was allocated to the plan implementation, the most expensive natural resource management budget in Australia's history.

The first Basin Plan is now up for review. Has it achieved its key purpose and goals? Has it been a good investment of public money? What should a new plan or Basin Plan #2 look like? These questions have caused a series of studies and reports to be developed by the Murray-

Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) who have released a [Discussion Paper](#) on these key issues. The Murray-Darling Conservation Alliance (MDCA) has released a [High Ambition Statement](#).

We have until Friday 1 May [to provide feedback](#) on the issues and future directions for the Basin.

Calls for submissions to Basin Plan Review

With dire predictions on the long-term sustainability of the Basin, particularly in light of climate change, this review is critical. It is the first comprehensive review since the Basin Plan was launched in 2012 and will inform water management for the next 10 years. Consultation Closes: 1 May 2026

To make a submission:

<https://getinvolved.mdba.gov.au/2026basinplanreview>



Conservation councils in the various States across the Basin have created a bold vision for the Murray Darling Basin under the umbrella of the [Murray Darling Conservation Alliance](#). It Includes calls for:

More water for rivers: Too much water has been taken from inland rivers for too long, denying them the flows they need to be healthy. When rivers have the water they need, they sustain a thriving web of birds, plants, fish, molluscs and other animals in a myriad of wetlands, aquifers and floodplains. Rivers need water so they can continue to support the oldest living culture on the planet. We need to set targets to return that water to the river, taking into account the impacts of a hotter, drier climate, and confidently measuring our progress.

Natural rhythm of river flows: Rivers need to flood regularly. The floodplain developed over thousands of years to support a delicate mosaic of different vegetation and habitat. Centuries-old River Red Gums, riverine wetlands and Black Box woodlands need a cycle of wetting and drying. Allowing more regular small to medium floods would sustain these places and reduce the severity of blackwater events. By collaborating with communities on the floodplain, upgrading and relocating flood-prone infrastructure, these landscapes can get the water they need. We can restore natural flows, instead of re-engineering the floodplain.

Water justice for Traditional Owners: The Basin is the ancestral domain for over 40 First Nations, but colonisation has left them with few rights over land and water. Over-extraction and water markets have doubled down on this dispossession – further damaging Country, disempowering Traditional Owners in water management and denying their share of wealth made from their land. Until we address this history, any pursuit of reconciliation will remain out of reach. Recognising self-determination means returning water to support cultural traditions and community development.

We need to make sure First Nations have a say over how rivers and Country are managed. **Water market within ecological limits:** The current water market is flawed, leading to negative impacts on both people and the environment. Speculators and large corporations are making huge profits, while local communities suffer. Dishonest actors, such as those building illegal dams and exploiting loopholes in water-sharing plans, have undermined the system. This has disrupted the natural flow of rivers, damaging riverbanks and harming fish populations. We need a water market that serves the needs of people and respects ecological limits.

Resilient regional communities: River communities are entitled to employment, income, education, health care, decent housing and a high standard of living. Regional communities are also on the front lines of climate change, disappearing river flows and erratic flood events. We need ongoing funding for communities to adapt to a drying climate with diverse, resilient economies.

Have input to critical conservation policy 2026 marks the culmination of the MDBA's Basin Plan Review process, with a 12-week formal consultation period now open, followed by recommendations to the Minister later in the year.

This is a powerful opportunity for you to have a say on government policy that will affect nature conservation over much of western NSW. During this consultation period, both the MDBA and the [One Basin Cooperative Research Centre](#) (CRC) are running online sessions to help you to make informed and insightful comments to the MDBA discussion paper. From March 17–27, the One Basin CRC will host a [major online event series](#) designed to empower the Basin community to influence policy. Register now to understand more about the Review and the future of the Basin.



**Major Reform is Needed
to
Restore Environmental Flows,
Embed Climate Change in Water Limits
and
Fix Governance Failures
in the Basin Plan**

As the Murray–Darling Basin Plan undergoes review, leading environmental organisations — the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, the Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC), and the Murray–Darling Conservation Alliance (MDCA) — are united on one central message:

The Plan is not yet delivering the river health outcomes it promised, and urgent reform is needed.

The Plan Is Not Meeting Environmental Flow Targets

The Wentworth Group’s 2023 scientific assessment found that, over the past four decades, only around 31% of environmental water requirements across the Basin have been met — and since the Basin Plan commenced in 2012, performance has declined further.

Their conclusion is stark: most rivers in the Basin are not receiving the flows they need to sustain river ecosystems, wetlands and floodplains.

Similarly, the Nature Conservation Council of NSW argues that too much water continues to be extracted for irrigation, leaving rivers, wetlands and floodplains in ongoing ecological decline.

The Murray–Darling Conservation Alliance echoes this, stating that over-extraction remains the fundamental problem and that restoring river health requires returning more “real water” to the system.



**1. Recover More Environmental Water
- Including the 450 GL**

Across all three organisations, the top reform priority is clear: complete and strengthen environmental water recovery.

The Wentworth Group calls for delivery of the full suite of Basin Plan commitments, including recovery of outstanding environmental water and removal of constraints that prevent water from reaching floodplains and wetlands.

The NCC strongly supports direct water buybacks from willing sellers as the most efficient and reliable way to return water to rivers, rather than relying primarily on infrastructure projects that have under-delivered ecological benefits.

The MDCA likewise calls for significantly more water to be returned to the rivers and stresses that targets must reflect reduced inflows under a hotter, drier climate.

2. Embed Climate Change into Sustainable Take Limits

A critical reform area identified by all three groups is the need to properly account for climate change.

The Wentworth Group argues that the Environmentally Sustainable Level of Take (ESLT) must be re-evaluated in light of projected climate scenarios, rather than relying on historical hydrology. They recommend regular review of sustainable diversion limits and stronger alignment between environmental flow requirements and water allocation decisions.

The NCC has highlighted the risks of using outdated historical data in water sharing plans and has advocated for explicit incorporation of climate projections into extraction limits.

The MDCA similarly calls for water recovery targets and management rules that reflect the reality of a hotter, drier Basin with declining average inflows.

In short, climate change must be treated as a central driver of water policy — not an afterthought.

3. Remove Barriers to Delivering Environmental Water

Another consistent theme is the need to fix governance and delivery barriers. The NCC has pointed to NSW rules that can delay environmental water delivery for extended periods, effectively blocking flows to wetlands and floodplains when they are most needed. They argue environmental water should not be treated as if it were irrigation water in ways that hinder its use.

The Wentworth Group recommends improved transparency and accountability, including public reporting dashboards and annual validation of water models against actual outcomes.

The MDCA calls for water markets and trading rules to operate within ecological limits and not undermine environmental objectives.

4. Recognise First Nations Water Rights and Community Resilience

All three organisations stress the importance of reforming governance to better recognise Traditional Owners' water rights and cultural flows.

The MDCA calls for restoration of meaningful water rights and decision-making power to First Nations peoples. The NCC supports stronger recognition of cultural water needs. The Wentworth Group recommends accelerating programs that define and secure cultural water requirements within Basin planning frameworks.

In addition, the MDCA highlights the need to build resilient Basin communities through diversified regional economies, infrastructure and social support — recognising that healthy rivers underpin long-term community wellbeing.



Will calls for more ‘local’ participation and a ‘catchment’ approach resolve Basin wide issues?

The launch of the discussion paper has led to a number of key stakeholders suggesting that the solution is a need for more local participation and an emphasis on catchments. Both items are useful conceptual tools, but we have to be careful in overbranding tools, particularly words like ‘local’ and ‘catchment’. While they are simple, catching, and seem intuitive, their central premise around ‘geography’ is a downfall.

The emphasis on ‘catchments’ ignores that most of the one million km² of basin is flat, low-lying and far inland with many of the catchment huge. While ‘catchments’ might be useful planning units in Victoria, state boundaries create challenges. For example, the Murray River, the Victorian/NSW border make the ‘NSW Murray Catchment’ only a northern half of a catchment.

Moreover, it depends on what we are managing. A catchment is not an effective planning unit when considering the conservation of migratory birds and/or those species with opportunistic lifestyles that rely on exploiting new food resources when they become available.

The emphasis on ‘local’ ignores that the four longest rivers in Australia are in the basin. People in these catchments rarely see themselves as part of a whole. The people in Echuca Albury, Swan Hill and Renmark are distinct. Moreover, rivers are not lakes: they flow. This means upstream users can have downstream effects. Local involvement is no answer to issues that start in the headwaters and become manifest many kilometres away.

There is little doubt that the previous focus on water has not led to the outcomes that communities may have hoped for in the basin plan. Local participation and an emphasis on catchments are not silver bullets. Such over branding effects collaboration. Local participation can be useful.

It can lead to greater understanding and acceptance of change and local knowledge can also lead to more informed on-ground actions. But the true focus should be on collaborative governance with an emphasis on subsidiarity across the board.

Similarly, ‘catchments’ can be useful planning units, but we are attempting to manage socio-ecological systems so there is a need to apply integrated land and water management rather than restrict ourselves our thinking to geographically focused solutions being the only answer.

A Shared Reform Agenda

Despite different organisational perspectives - scientific, conservation advocacy, and alliance-based campaigning - the message is remarkably aligned:

1. **Recover more environmental water, including outstanding commitments.**
2. **Reassess sustainable diversion limits in light of climate change.**
3. **Remove legal and operational barriers to delivering environmental flows.**
4. **Improve transparency, compliance and governance.**
5. **Recognise and secure First Nations water rights.**

For Inland Rivers Network members, the review of the Basin Plan presents a critical opportunity.

The science is clear, the ecological decline is visible, and climate pressures are intensifying. Strengthening the Plan now is essential if we are to restore the Basin’s rivers, wetlands and communities for generations to come.