



Australian Government



MURRAY—  
DARLING  
BASIN AUTHORITY

# Opening statement – Senate Estimates

Friday 6 March 2020

The Basin has been battered by extreme weather this summer. Extraordinary heatwaves, hailstorms, bushfires and more recently, much-welcomed rain which will see water reach Menindee Lakes in a matter of days.

We've experienced two summers in one. Up until the middle of January the Basin experienced record high temperatures – December was the hottest month on record. Then, almost overnight we saw a significant change in conditions and we finally started getting some decent rain.

This rain has put a welcome smile on many faces, but we have a long way to go before we can say that the drought is over. It is even a longer way to go before we see farmers and communities back on their feet. As of 26 February, northern basin water storages are at 13% and southern storages at 32%. This is the lowest they've been at the start of autumn for 10 years. The forecast for autumn is really anyone's guess, according to the bureau.

Thanks to significant rain, we've seen some of our river systems connect for the first time in four years. In line with the Basin Plan, both Queensland and NSW protected these first flushes, to ensure water gets as far through the system as possible to benefit both communities and the environment. I want to be clear – this is the Basin Plan in action.

We are watching this water closely via satellite as it heads into the heart of the Basin and will notify the states if we spot anything requiring further investigation.

Since the last Estimates hearing I can confirm that South Australia, Queensland and some of Victoria's water resource plans are accredited and operational. The remaining Victorian plans are now with Minister Pitt for accreditation and the ACT's plans are being assessed by us. It is great to see this week that NSW indicated they're finalising their plans for our assessment.

With rivers restarting, water quality is now a concern right across the Basin. There's a blackwater event at the head of the flow in the Darling system, and we are seeing more fish deaths. The states are monitoring and acting where they can, and we will work alongside them to help where we are able.

Quite rightly water management is the focus of a range of reviews. The reviews of the Murray Darling Agreement, of the operation of water markets and of the lived experiences of towns, communities and people in the Basin will all yield key insights into how we can improve water management for the benefit of all. It is good that we have fresh eyes looking at these issues.

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If there are ways that we can be smarter with our water, then all water users – including governments – should be taking action, especially as the climate gets drier and water becomes scarcer.

These reviews will provide insights to guide us all. We stand ready to work with all Basin governments and communities to do so.

The Basin Plan has reviews built into it – it is designed to give space to reflect, adjust and change as new information and science comes forward and we learn more about this magnificent natural asset that basin communities rely on.

We know that drought, climate change and other factors are taking their toll, and communities and industries are also dealing with decades of water reform. The scale and pace of change is hard to maintain, and they need help to adjust. We get it. My staff live and work in the Basin each and every day and we hear and see these stories.

The Basin Plan is the first reform of its kind in the world – it’s in Australia’s interest to rebalance the scales and create a sustainable long-term footing for industries and communities. This generation is bearing the brunt of change, so the next generations can have certainty about their future. Our farmers and all affected communities deserve our congratulation for staying the course.

We at the MDBA, are doing our best to deliver on this promise. We will work alongside those who are adjusting their lives and livelihoods to create a better future for us all.

