

Chapter 4

Cross-portfolio Murray-Darling Basin Plan matters

3.1 This chapter highlights some of the key issues discussed during the hearing on cross-portfolio Murray-Darling Basin Plan matters on 25 May 2018.

3.2 The committee heard from the Water Division of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office.

3.3 Witnesses from each agency appeared at the table concurrently. This chapter provides an overview of matters that were discussed.

Newly announced Murray-Darling Basin Plan measures

3.4 The committee discussed the progress of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (DAWR) in implementing the measures announced by the government on 7 May 2018.

3.5 The committee questioned the witnesses about the progress towards appointing a Northern Basin Commissioner (the Commissioner). DAWR explained that the Commissioner will have responsibility for auditing and reporting on:

- progress on delivery of the Northern Basin Review outcomes and toolkit measures;
- the achievement of Basin Plan environmental outcomes in the northern basin;
- any additional information required to strengthen scientific understanding of the northern basin;
- ensuring long-term environmental watering plans that adequately reflect the environmental requirements for 'icon sites' in the northern basin;
- coordination activities with Indigenous communities to enhance their ability to contribute to the management, planning and delivery of water resources; and
- implementation of compliance measures.¹

3.6 DAWR explained that it is currently developing a set of terms of reference for the role and is identifying appropriate people who could fill the conditions of the position. DAWR further advised that it will be discussing the appointment of the Commissioner, as well as the other measures announced, with the basin states.²

1 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 5–6.

2 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 6–7.

3.7 DAWR advised that while it will provide support to the Commissioner, the extent and scope of that support will be determined in conjunction with the appointed Commissioner.³

3.8 The committee discussed the \$20 million measure to improve hydrometric networks in the northern basin and to develop remote sensing and other technologies to enhance monitoring and measurement in all jurisdictions. DAWR explained that this measure would assist regulators to identify instances of non-compliance. DAWR told the committee that it is currently working with Geosciences Australia and CSIRO, as well as the basin states to further develop this measure.⁴

3.9 The committee also explored the new measures relating to Indigenous engagement. DAWR told the committee that it has held initial discussions with the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations and the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations regarding the package and will be holding further discussions on the implementation of the measures. Some of the key measures include:

- \$40 million to support Indigenous communities in the Basin and their cultural and economic water entitlements (and associated planning activities); and
- \$20 million grant program for economic development projects in Indigenous regional and rural communities most impacted by the Basin Plan.⁵

Compliance activities

3.10 The committee extensively traversed the outcomes of the recent compliance reviews conducted by the MDBA and a number of basin states. The MDBA spoke about some of the action that the New South Wales Government has taken in response to the *Independent investigation into NSW water management and compliance* report, including shifting responsibility for water management to the NSW Department of Industry, and establishing the Natural Resources Access Regulator.⁶

3.11 In addition, in response to the report, the NSW government established an officials-level group to develop recommendations on measures to protect environmental flows. The group comprises representatives of the NSW Department of Industry, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, NSW Department of Primary Industries, NSW Water, MDBA and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office. The MDBA told the committee that this group has developed recommendations on a variety of measures to protect environmental flows, ranging from individual daily extraction limits to active event management. The group anticipates that these measures will be given effect through the basin states' water resource plans, which are due for completion by 30 June 2019.⁷

3 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, p. 7.

4 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, p. 8.

5 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 25–27.

6 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, p. 34.

7 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, p. 4.

3.12 In order to respond to the recommendations of the reviews in an integrated way, the basin states and the Commonwealth Government agreed to develop a Basin Compliance Compact (the Compact). The MDBA explained that the Compact will set out the key issues that governments will commit to acting upon, and is expected to be accompanied by more detailed work programs. The MDBA told the committee that Dr Wendy Craik was appointed by the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council to provide oversight of the development of the Compact. Dr Craik has attended drafting group meetings and is preparing a separate report for the ministerial council on the Compact.⁸

3.13 DAWR told the committee that the Commonwealth Government has indicated to basin states that future national partnership agreements will link payments to compliance activities of the states.⁹

Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder

3.14 The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) delivered an opening statement, updating the committee on key activities and achievements of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office over the previous twelve months. These achievements included:

- support for the re-establishment of black bream in the Murray estuary and the eel-tailed catfish in the Wakool River;
- connecting over 2000 kilometres of river system across the northern basin to support stressed native fish populations in residual waterholes;
- delivering a coordinated flow to support vegetation along the Foulbur river, resulting in the largest recorded migration of pouched lamprey through the Murray mouth;
- inundating 20 000 hectares of the Macquarie Marshes, supporting over 50 species of native water birds; and
- exporting half a million tonnes of salt from the Murray mouth and the River Murray system.¹⁰

3.15 The CEWH also informed the committee of the monitoring and evaluation work it conducts. Officials spoke about the Long Term Intervention Monitoring Project, in which Australian research institutions conduct monitoring and evaluation activities in seven selected areas within the Basin.¹¹

3.16 The CEWH also told the committee of its engagement with communities along the Basin to inform them of the work being conducted. Officials told the committee that the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office has six local

8 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, p. 7.

9 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, p. 8.

10 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 2–3.

11 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 10–11.

engagement officers in the Basin that have networks with local communities, including recreational fishers and bird watchers.¹²

Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism projects

3.17 The committee sought information about the supply, constraints and efficiency projects developed by basin state governments as part of the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) Adjustment Mechanism. The department told the committee that all projects under the SDL Adjustment Mechanism need to be implemented and operational by the middle of 2024. The committee sought updates on two projects in particular, the Riverine Recovery Project and the South Australian Riverland Flood Plan Integrated Infrastructure Program.¹³

3.18 The committee discussed the oversight and audit responsibilities for the projects under the SDL Adjustment Mechanism. DAWR and MDBA told the committee that the department is responsible for the provision of funding to the state governments and ensuring the financial milestones have been met. The MDBA is responsible for ensuring delivery of environmental outcomes. The MDBA told the committee that it will report annually on its confidence that the projects will deliver environmental outcomes.¹⁴

Dredging at the Murray mouth

3.19 The committee discussed the progress towards keeping the Murray mouth open without requiring dredging. The MDBA told the committee that dredging has been nearly continuous at the Murray mouth since 2012. While the aim is for the Murray mouth to be kept open without dredging, there has been a steady build-up of sand in the mouth over several years that will require a number of large flow events to reset.

3.20 The MDBA informed the committee that that the Basin Plan includes a target for keeping the Murray mouth open and that once the remainder of the Plan is implemented, including the constraints management strategy, high flows will be possible which will assist in achieving this aim.¹⁵

**Senator Barry O'Sullivan
Chair**

12 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 10–12.

13 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 22–23.

14 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 23–24.

15 *Proof Hansard*, 25 May 2018, pp. 58–61.