

Water Division opening statement:

- Good morning committee members and thank you Chair for the opportunity to make a short opening statement.
- As you are all aware, the Murray–Darling Basin Plan is a long-term and complex reform designed to ensure a sustainable future for communities, industries and the environment.
- The Department recognises that work to implement the Basin Plan has been going on during a time of immense stress for communities. The effects of the COVID pandemic, coupled with years of drought and a savage summer of bushfires has combine to an unprecedented set of challenges.
- The final report from the *Independent Assessment of social and economic conditions in the Murray-Darling Basin* led by Ms Robbie Sefton demonstrated the extra pressure some communities have experienced because of water recovery, amongst other issues.
- The Government listened to the findings of this review and used them, along with the findings of the *First statutory review of the Water for the Environment Special Account*, to inform a new approach to implementing the Basin Plan. Both reports and the government responses are available on the department’s website.
- It’s for the reasons I’ve mentioned above that on 4 September 2020, Minister for Resource, Water and Northern Australia, the Hon Keith Pitt, announced the \$270 million Murray-Darling Communities Investment Package. Importantly, it is designed to put communities and jobs at the heart of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.
- The package is made up of practical and realistic measures over four years from 2020-21 to:
 - Improve community and river health;
 - Build trust, transparency and accountability in governments; and
 - Improve implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

- The package is a demonstration of the government's commitment to build a culture of engagement and genuine trust with communities and between governments.
- The appointment of Air Chief Marshal Sir Angus Houston AK, AFC (Ret'd) to lead the Murray-Darling Basin Authority is a demonstration of that commitment. Sir Angus brings extensive leadership experience to the role and has lost no time in getting out and about to meet with Basin communities – where COVID travel restrictions have allowed.
- The Department is focused on delivering this package by designing and implementing water programs in partnership with communities while also supporting Basin states to accelerate planning and delivery of projects.
- All Basin governments remain committed to the Basin Plan. It is already delivering real benefits for the environment as the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder will now outline briefly.
- Thank you.