



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture

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Mr Stephen Palethorpe
Secretary
Environment and Communications Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Palethorpe

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission to assist the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee's inquiry into the Murray-Darling Basin Commission of Inquiry Bill 2019.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan (the Basin Plan) is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address historic over-allocation of water entitlements and improve the health of our river systems, in the interests of sustaining the Basin's communities, industries and natural environment. The establishment of the Plan and its implementation reflects a partnership between the Commonwealth and Basin jurisdictions. It requires strong, continued commitment to ensure all Australians can enjoy the benefits of this nationally important river system for many years to come.

The department notes that implementation of the Basin Plan has been the subject of many substantive reviews: There have been several recent Parliamentary inquiries into the Murray-Darling Basin, a number of state and Commonwealth reviews, independent assessments on specific aspects of the Plan's rollout, and the five-year assessment of the Plan by the Productivity Commission which is provided for in the *Water Act 2007*. The Australian Government remains focussed on working with Basin states and the Australian Capital Territory to address issues raised in these inquiries and reviews to more effectively implement the Basin Plan.

Progress is being made in implementing the Plan. So far, more than 2100 gigalitres (GL) of water has been recovered for the environment under the Basin Plan, which is water that will be available for the environment each year on average in perpetuity.

Over the past four years, 750 planned environmental watering events have delivered clear environmental benefits. On 10 July 2019 the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder announced that water for the environment would be used in the River Murray throughout Winter and Spring to ensure that native fish have the water they depend on to survive, feed and breed. This flow will provide benefits along the length of the Murray River, such as providing shelter and food for a range of animals and water for wetland plants.

The Basin Plan is a long-term reform and we are seven years into its 12-year implementation period. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority, which prepares the Basin Plan, is an independent, expert authority, which works with a range of experts, subjects its work to independent peer review and routinely publishes its findings and data sets.

The Basin Plan has built-in adaptive mechanisms so that management of the Basin's water resources can be adjusted in response to new information. Statutory reviews of the Basin Plan are undertaken every ten years and the Productivity Commission's five-yearly reviews of the Plan's implementation provide opportunities for new information, tools and techniques to be considered.

The department recognises that implementation of the Basin Plan has been challenging, particularly in the unprecedented dry conditions experienced over the last few years. The government has recently announced or established two reviews that will contribute to a better understanding of these challenges for Basin communities and possible responses. These include the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's investigation of the water market and its functions, and the Independent Assessment of Social and Economic Conditions in the Basin which is being undertaken by an independent expert panel.

The department has released substantial information around implementation of the Basin Plan that can be found at <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/water/mdb/basin-plan>.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Thompson
Deputy Secretary

17 July 2019