

Queensland's submission

**Senate Select Committee on multijurisdictional management
and execution of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan – Release of
Issues Paper Stage 2**

March 2020

Summary

The Queensland Government welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission on topics raised in the Issues Paper on the management and execution of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan 2012 (the Basin Plan). This submission builds on Queensland’s submission to the Senate Select Committee on multijurisdictional management and execution of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan in September 2019 and they should be read in conjunction.

The Queensland Government:

1. Supports the Basin Plan and is committed to working collaboratively with all relevant jurisdictions to implement the Basin Plan on time and in full. Queensland is the first jurisdiction in the country to have all its water resource plans accredited by the Australian Government as being Basin Plan compliant.
2. Treats matters of compliance seriously and supports reporting water use in an open and transparent manner.
3. Remains committed to ensuring that Queensland’s water measurement and compliance frameworks are effective and uphold public confidence in water management across the state.

In this context, the Queensland Government would like to acknowledge the ongoing work of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) in overseeing the complex task of implementing the Basin Plan in conjunction with the Basin States and Territory. The Queensland Government has, and continues to maintain, a collaborative partnership with the MDBA.

1. Adequacy of Information

The Queensland Government is committed to improving the accuracy and transparency of water information, including water market information, in accordance with its commitments under the Basin Compliance Compact and state-wide Rural Water Management Program.

Queensland is working collaboratively with New South Wales and Murray-Darling Basin Authority to deliver a suite of products that provide information on water availability and use at the farm, river reach and valley scale. These products will utilise a range of existing and emerging tools (e.g. remote sensing) to deal with the practical challenges of measurement of water resources across the highly variable landscape and episodic nature of the river flows in the northern Murray-Darling Basin.

Whilst the intention of a single point of truth for water information is supported, there is no compelling research that development of a single point of access to all water entitlement data will provide the intended outcome at a basin-wide scale. Social research indicates that the most trusted data is often delivered at the local scale and from the key provider of the service. Queensland is confident that strategies being implemented under the Basin Compliance Compact and Rural Water Management Program will provide the community with the necessary assurance that water is being managed under a strong legislative program with systems (and people) in place to ensure that people are taking only what their property right allows and no more.

2. Complexity of governance arrangements

The Queensland Government supports reform of the current governance arrangements to ensure significant risks to Basin Plan implementation are effectively managed. This reform should be guided by recommendations included in the Review of the Murray-Darling Basin Joint Governance Arrangements (March 2018) by the independent reviewer Greg Claydon, and by the Joint Basin government response to the Productivity Commission inquiry report: Murray–Darling Basin Plan: Five-year assessment (January 2019).

The Queensland Government is also committed to working with all jurisdictions to support the role of the Inspector-General and to ensure that compliance functions are coordinated and not duplicated across jurisdictions.

3. Environmental watering

All environmental water allocations in Queensland are owned by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH). The majority of this water is unregulated and is currently left instream to provide in-catchment and downstream environmental benefits. Active event-based management options are being explored by the CEWH in consultation with Queensland agencies, such as options to store and release water and opportunistic purchase of additional water on the temporary water market.

In addition to the environmental water held by the CEWH, Queensland's water plans include rules and thresholds for taking water which ensure that environmental flows are protected, including low flows, flows for replenishing refugial waterholes and flows crossing the Queensland border into New South Wales. Having the rules and thresholds for taking water embedded in our water plans removes the need for ad hoc restrictions and embargoes, such as cease to pump directions, which undermine community confidence in water management arrangements. It also means that local communities have greater certainty and security over their water supplies. Queensland rules-based approach to protection of environmental water is particularly suited to river flows in the Queensland basin catchments, which are highly variable, typically characterised by long periods of no flow and large flood events. Climatic conditions in recent times have particularly highlighted these 'boom and bust' extremes. The hydrological features and patterns experienced in the Queensland basin catchments (and other parts of the northern Basin) and the low level of regulation of these flows by major storages means that water planning and management practices differ significantly from those in the southern connected Basin.

Queensland supports the Northern Basin Environmental Watering Group as the appropriate forum for strategic discussions and sharing information to support improved coordination, planning and accounting for cross-border environmental watering, including through more active management of environmental water holdings.

4. Water Resource Plans

Queensland is proud to be the first jurisdiction in the country to complete all its water resource plans and have them accredited by the Australian Government as being Basin Plan compliant. The Warrego-Paroo-Nebine water resource plan was accredited in June 2017 and the Condamine and Balonne, Border Rivers and Moonie water resource plans were accredited in September 2019.

Queensland's statutory water plans are the central component of the water resource plans accredited by the Australian Government. The water plans were developed in accordance with the requirements of the Queensland *Water Act 2000*. The Act specifies both the process for developing the water plans, including consultation requirements, and the key considerations and content that they must include. As required under the Act, the water plans are intended to provide a long-term sustainable balance between the needs of urban and rural water users in the plan areas, and environmental water needs, both within the catchments and downstream.

Water plans are based on hydrologic, environmental, cultural and socio-economic assessments as well as extensive consultation.

For example, in the development of the Condamine and Balonne and Boarder Rivers Moonie water plans, over 80 public information sessions were held in addition to targeted meetings with water users, industry representatives and local councils.

There was also an unprecedented level of consultation with Aboriginal communities across the plan areas including 38 meetings with individual nations. Many of these meetings were held on country, and all were organised with the assistance of a dedicated Indigenous engagement officer.

Altogether there were almost 500 submissions received on draft proposals across these two plan areas, many of which were in support of the draft water plan provisions.

Almost 40% of the submissions were from Aboriginal stakeholders, which is, again, unprecedented, and demonstrates the effectiveness of the engagement strategy used.

Ongoing consultation also occurred during development of the water plans with other jurisdictions and Commonwealth agencies. This was done to ensure good alignment with the requirements of the Basin Plan and with cross-border planning arrangements.

Feedback from all sectors on the level of engagement was overwhelmingly positive. The high level of consultation ensured stakeholders had adequate information to understand the proposals and how they could provide feedback on proposals, through attending meetings or making a formal submission.

As the water resource plans comprise many instruments and texts, there is a need to streamline the process to maintain their accreditation in future when non-material changes are made to any water resource plan components. For example, since the Warrego–Paroo–Nebine water resource plan was accredited, the *Water Act 2000* (Qld) has been amended to change the planning process and instruments, including transitioning the relevant water resource plan statutory instruments. There is questionable benefit in requiring subsequent reaccreditation of this WRP as it would not lead to an improvement in how the Basin Plan outcomes are achieved. Re-accreditation requirements need to be configured to maximise efficiency of process and minimise effort taken from managing the water resource plans, particularly given the number of jurisdictions and instruments from each that comprise the water resource plans.

5. Compliance arrangements

Like all basin states, the Queensland Government implements components of the Australian Government's *Water Act 2007* and the Basin Plan. The Australian Government oversees Queensland's compliance under with *Water Act 2007* and the Basin Plan. The Queensland Government reports annually on progress in meeting its obligations under the Basin Plan and Basin

Compliance Compact and this information forms part of the annual report published by the MDBA. The Queensland Government is committed to ensuring that water measurement and compliance frameworks are effective and uphold public confidence in water management across the state. The appropriate framework for this is the through the agreed strategies under the Basin Compliance Compact and Queensland Rural Water Management Program.

Queensland also welcomes the role of the new Inspector-General in providing oversight of Basin Plan Implementation and compliance, and is committed to working constructively with all jurisdictions to support the Inspector-General in this role.

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