

OPENING STATEMENT – THE BASIN PLAN

Talking Points:

- In response to drought, the emerging effects of climate change and decades of over allocation and mismanagement, the Commonwealth Water Act 2007 commenced in March 2008. The Water Act established the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and gave it responsibility for developing a Basin Plan for adoption by the Commonwealth Minister for Water. The Water Act was amended in December 2008 following the signing of the intergovernmental Agreement on Murray-Darling Basin Reform in July 2008. These amendments transferred the functions of the former Murray-Darling Basin Commission to the Authority and enabled the Basin Plan to provide arrangements for meeting critical human water needs.
- Over the past eighteen months the Authority has been developing the proposed basin plan for public comment. This has involved extensive technical work and analysis utilising both staff recruited to the Authority and external expertise.
- Central to this work has been the assessments needed to inform the proposed plan's long-term average sustainable diversion limits. Under the Water Act these limits must reflect an environmentally sustainable level of take – that is the level at which water can be taken that will not compromise key environmental assets, key ecosystem functions, the productive base or key environmental outcomes. To determine the environmentally sustainable level of take, the Authority has assessed the Basin's environment water needs.
- As a starting point to this assessment, the Authority compiled a list of environmental assets using existing international, Commonwealth and state/territory data sources. The assets were then ranked against criteria to identify those that were 'key'. The next step was to identify the amount of water these assets needed to not be compromised – however, not only have the environmental assets never been previously identified nor prioritised at Basin scale, but in many cases an assessment of their water needs has never been undertaken.
- From a surface water perspective, many of the assets in the Basin are hydrologically connected and interdependent – if we provide

water for one asset we will provide water for many assets, both upstream and downstream. Recognising this interdependence, the Authority has identified 18 indicator assets that drive the environmental hydrology of the basin. Most of these 18 indicator assets are large, have a broad range of habitat types and are located low within their corresponding catchments. The eighteen assets include sites such as the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray-Mouth, Hattah Lakes and Barmah Millewa Forest to name just three.

The amount of environmental water required to not compromise the indicator assets was then determined by setting environmental objectives and targets. These were developed with reference to the need for the Basin Plan to provide for giving effect to relevant international agreements, for example the need to conserve Ramsar wetlands consistently with their ecological character. This environmental water will also provide for floodplain and wetland management ecosystem functions associated with rivers and creeks connecting the assets, as well as the broader environmental water requirements of ecosystem services, the productive base and the key environmental outcomes for the water resource.

Water planning models have been used to translate the environmental water requirements into sustainable diversion limits. For the first iteration of the Basin Plan, the Authority is relying heavily on state surface-water models. The modelling platform uses existing state models and connects them together to provide a Basin-scale modelling capacity that covers the major river systems. This platform has been used to assess the most efficient way of meeting environmental requirements and reducing conveyance losses. The costs and benefits of alternative SDL options to supply the specified environmental water requirements have been identified through social and economic analysis.

Sustainable diversion limits for groundwater have been calculated using a different approach – based on a recharge risk assessment method. The method considers the level of risk to key environmental assets, key ecosystem functions, the productive base and key environmental outcomes. In eleven of the largest alluvial groundwater systems, detailed numerical modelling has also been undertaken.

To ensure that the approach for determining long term average sustainable diversion limits is based on the best available science and socio economic analysis the Authority has commissioned a range of studies, including fine scale social and economic analysis of fourteen irrigation areas where the potential impacts of changes to water availability are considered to be the greatest. The Authority has also sought input from leading scientists and other experts, including seeking advice from the CSIRO and its research partners on appropriate climate change scenarios to use in hydrological modelling.

Similarly the development of other elements of the plan has involved developing methods, incorporating scientific knowledge and expert input. For example the Independent Sustainable Rivers Audit Group's advice has informed the environmental watering plan's science based ecological targets. An assessment has also been undertaken of critical human water needs for the River Murray System based on how communities function during periods of low water availability.

During the development of the plan, the Authority has also undertaken stakeholder engagement for example through shop-fronts and attendance at numerous peak body and local government meetings, conferences and workshops. Central to engagement has been the release of a series of publications, including the Concept Statement in June 2009, the SDL Issues Paper in November last year and the 'Assessment environmental water needs of the Basin' paper, published in April 2010. Forums for peak bodies and the scientific community were held on December to seek input on the SDL issues paper, with a follow up forum being held in April 2010 in Canberra to build on the work of the previous forums.

To ensure people can access those parts of the proposed Basin Plan relevant to their concerns or area of interest, the Authority intends to use a range of on-line and printed products to support consultation on the proposed plan. In particular, regional products are proposed based on a division of the Basin into nineteen separate regions. These regional scale products will provide a greater level of detail about the relevant region so that local people can find out about those aspects of the proposed plan that are relevant to them and their region.

The Authority is currently considering the outcomes of its technical work and the management settings proposed ahead of commencing the next phase of stakeholder engagement. Once it has fully considered the proposed plan it will then be able to make an informed decision about the engagement strategy and timetable for release of the plan for public comment.

While the engagement strategy is currently still under consideration by the Authority, it is expected to involve extensive opportunities for people to find out what is proposed and provide a genuine opportunity for people to provide input and feedback. Engagement is likely to include a series of public meetings to provide people with the information that they need to understand what is proposed and to listen to what they think about the proposed plan. Meetings will be held regionally, in metropolitan centres and with Aboriginal communities. We are also looking at running a submissions hearing process – to provide people with an opportunity to present their views to the Authority in person.