

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
Legislation Committee**

Answers to questions on notice

Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts portfolio

Supplementary Budget Estimates, October 2009

Outcome:	4	Question No:	104
Program:	4.1		
Division/Agency:	National Water Commission		
Topic:	NWC – assessment of progress – Projects in SA		
Hansard Page ECA:	118 (20/10)		

Senator XENOPHON asked:

Further to the questions of Senator Siewert, in a South Australian context with respect to projects in South Australia—in particular, the Lower Lakes and Coorong—can you tell us what was the commission’s assessment of those plans and in particular the level of progress on the part of the South Australian government? Also, what was your assessment of the cooperation between the South Australian government and the Commonwealth?

Mr Matthews—I would have to take the first two notice.

Answer/s:

The Commission’s 2009 Biennial Assessment did not specifically assess projects or plans directly relating to the Lower Lakes or the Coorong.

However, the Commission’s assessment of progress in addressing overallocation and overuse, and in the management of environmental water, are relevant to the Lower Lakes and the Coorong.

The Commission considers that high-profile cases of ecological decline, such as in the Lower Lakes and the Coorong in South Australia, have been linked to a combination of drought and unsustainable levels of extraction. The Commission recommends that jurisdictions make every possible effort to meet their NWI commitments and demonstrate clear pathways for the return of all systems currently identified as overallocated and overused to within sustainable extraction limits.

The Commission finds that processes for establishing environmental objectives require significant strengthening. While the Australian community has a general sense of the water-dependent environmental assets that it values—for example, the Coorong and Lower Lakes—the processes for identifying them are not sufficiently systematic. While there has been an increase in the use of scientifically reviewed and holistic methods to determine environmental water requirements, some jurisdictions still do not use methods that are holistic, well documented, or independently peer reviewed. The Commission recommends that all jurisdictions put in place systematic and transparent processes to determine environmental water outcomes and requirements.

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
Legislation Committee**

Answers to questions on notice

Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts portfolio

Supplementary Budget Estimates, October 2009

In light of concerns about poor ecological health of areas such as the Coorong and Lower Lakes, and the continuing absence of agreement on environmentally sustainable levels of extraction, the Commission's Biennial Assessment recognises that governments have taken action to recover water for the environment through a range of programs including the Commonwealth's \$3.1 billion environmental water purchasing program. The Commission supports water recovery programs, including buybacks, but considers that uncertainty and debate about the sustainable level of water extraction continues to undermine confidence in management of our water resources. The Commission notes that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority is developing strategies to engage the community in the preparation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

The Commission also notes that the Commonwealth has provided up to \$200 million to develop an enduring response to the long-term ecological management of the Lower Lakes and the Coorong. Progress in developing this plan is well underway.

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
Legislation Committee**

Answers to questions on notice

Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts portfolio

Supplementary Budget Estimates, October 2009

Outcome:	4	Question No:	105
Program:	4.1		
Division/Agency:	National Water Commission		
Topic:	National Water Commission – audit of basin plan		
Hansard Page ECA:	Written Questions on Notice		

Senators BIRMINGHAM and MACDONALD asked:

Budget Paper 2 stated funding of \$7.5 million will be provided to the National Water Commission to independently audit the effectiveness of the implementation of the Basin Plan and make public these reports.

1. Has the National Water Commission begun an independent audit of the effectiveness of the Government's Murray-Darling Basin plan?
2. When will the Commission's reports be made public?

Answers:

1. The Basin Plan has not yet been made. The Commission has commenced its preparatory audit work and the first audit of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Basin Plan will be undertaken following the release of the Plan.
2. The Commission will report on its first audit by March 2013. The Minister has 15 sitting days in which to table the report in each House of the Parliament after being given the report.