



lifebloodalliance@gmail.com

Murray-Darling Basin Plan connects the Economy, Environment, Community and Country

1. Background

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan was adopted with bipartisan support in 2012 to return water to stressed rivers and wetlands and protect native fish, water birds, other water dependent species, wetland vegetation and First Nations cultural values.

2. Connectivity

The Murray-Darling Basin connects southern Queensland and northern Victoria with South Australia through NSW.

The connection between surface water, groundwater, and between rivers and floodplains is vital to the health of the Murray-Darling Basin, as a whole.

Connected flows are essential to protect water quality for communities that rely on surface and groundwater supplies across the Basin.

The connection to country is paramount to First Nations rights.

3. Compromise

The final agreed volume to be returned to river flows in the Basin Plan recognised the need to maintain the productivity of water dependent industry and associated communities within the Murray Darling Basin.

This volume of 3200 GL (gigalitre = billion litres) is well below the minimum volume identified by scientific research as necessary to halt continuing decline of the ecological health of Basin rivers and wetlands. The agreed volume is a compromise negotiated by competing interests and must be recognised as less than needed to restore river health.

There are many other industries and social needs that rely on a healthy river system that generates billions of dollars in economic benefits, such as tourism, fishing, town water supply and cultural connection.

4. Public Investment

The Australian taxpayer has invested over \$13b in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to keep the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin connected and flowing.

The investment to date has been poorly managed and has not resulted in the desired outcomes of the Basin Plan. Water recovery for rivers is lagging well behind schedule.

To meet the agreed water recovery target by 2024, public tender for voluntary sale of water licences is the fairest, most transparent and most cost-effective method of returning the water required to maintain the connectivity of the Basin. Water recovery should be complemented by investment in regional communities.

5. Key actions

Key actions the next Australian Government must implement to ensure the objectives of the Basin Plan are delivered on time and in full include:

- Returning 3200 GL of water to the environment as required under the Basin Plan by 2024
- Ensuring that all on and off farm water efficiency, SDLAM and Northern Basin toolkit infrastructure projects are properly assessed to ensure they deliver measurable water savings, provide tangible environmental benefits and are value for money
- Transforming the Office of Water Compliance (currently situated in the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment) into a fully independent agency with the powers and budget required to audit and enforce Basin States compliance with the Water Act 2007 and the Basin Plan
- Re-establishing the national water and environment departments as an independent standalone Australian Government agency
- Introducing a consistent water accounting, monitoring and reporting framework across the Basin. Once introduced, commission an independent Basin-wide audit of the current volume of water consumption (diversions) and water that has been returned to the environment from voluntary water buy-back programs, on/off farm water efficiency, SDLAM and Northern Basin toolkit infrastructure projects
- Immediately releasing the promised \$40 million funding package for MDB First Nation peoples to acquire water to meet their economic and cultural aspirations
- Ensuring the effects of climate change on the future availability of water throughout the Basin, and on potential sea level rise in the Lower Murray, are assessed when the Basin Plan is reviewed in 2026
- Amending the Water Act 2007 to revoke the 1500 GL cap on voluntary water buy backs and to include provisions in the Act to legally protect water that's been returned to the environment
- Resolving the identified physical and policy constraints hindering delivery of environmental flows throughout the MDB
- Ensuring pre-requisite policy measures are fully operational and effective to allow effective cooperative management of flows, including coordinated multi-system pulses for river health benefits.

6. About the Lifeblood Alliance

Consisting of environment, indigenous and community from across the Murray Darling Basin, the Lifeblood Alliance is committed to protecting and restoring the health of the Basin's rivers, wetlands, floodplains and aquifers for the benefit of current and future generations.

Current members of the Lifeblood Alliance:

Australian Conservation Foundation

Central West Environment Council

Conservation Council of South Australia

Environmental Farmers Network Environment

Environment Victoria

Healthy Rivers Dubbo

Healthy Rivers Lower Murray

Inland Rivers Network

Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations

Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations

Nature Conservation Council NSW

National Parks Association of NSW

Queensland Conservation Council

River Lakes and Coorong Action Group

Victoria Goulburn Valley Environment Group

7. Further information

Queensland Conservation Council: Nigel Parratt - water@qldconservation.org.au

Inland Rivers Network: Bev Smiles - inlandriversnetwork@gmail.com

Environment Victoria: Tyler Roche - T.Rotche@environmentvictoria.org.au

Nature Conservation Council NSW: Mel Gray - mgray@nature.org.au

Conservation SA: Craig Wilkins - craig.wilkins@conservationsa.org.au