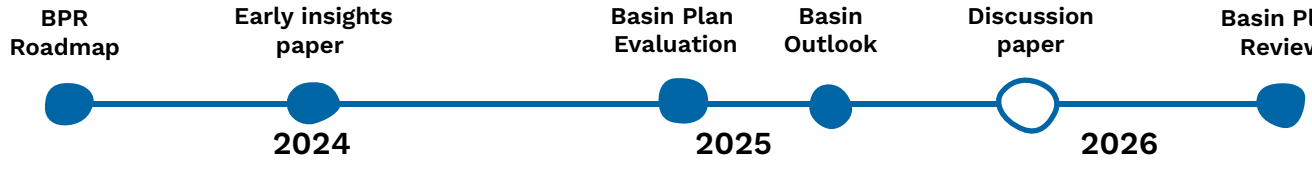
Australian Government

Murray–Darling Basin Authority

2026 Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review

Discussion Paper snapshot



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Acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners of the Murray–Darling Basin

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout the Murray–Darling Basin and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We offer our respects to the people, the cultures and the Elders past and present.

Aboriginal people should be aware that this publication may contain images, names or quotations of deceased persons.

About this snapshot

This snapshot is intended to provide a quick overview of the Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper.

If you require more detail, please refer to the relevant section of the Discussion Paper.

About the 2026 Basin Plan Review

A requirement of the *Water Act 2007* (Cth) is that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (Authority) must review the Basin Plan in 2026 and every 10 years thereafter.

A Discussion Paper was released on 5 February 2026, and submissions are invited until 5.00 pm AEST 1 May 2026.

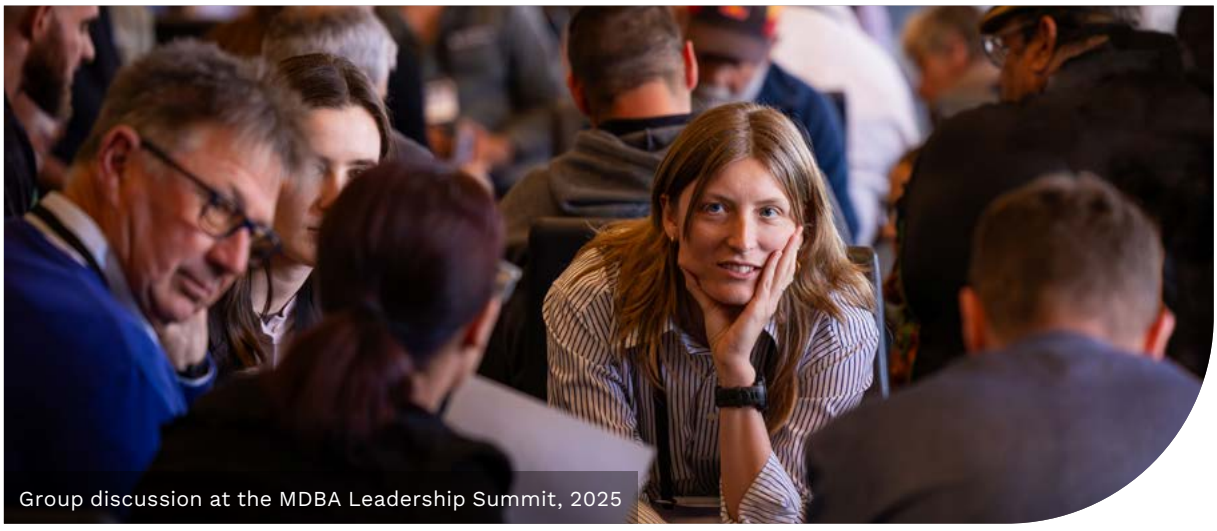
The Discussion Paper sets out the issues to be explored through the 2026 Basin Plan Review. Its purpose is to provide information on Basin Plan water management issues and options being considered. Feedback is invited, to help shape the Review Report recommendations.. It provides a foundation for dialogue, to enable the Authority to hear diverse perspectives early in the review process. This feedback will assist the Authority in making recommendations on how the Basin Plan and Basin water management can be improved.

We are seeking your feedback

The Basin Plan Review is an opportunity to improve how the Basin is managed and to move forward together. We want to hear what matters most to you.

As you read through the Discussion Paper consider these feedback questions.

- What do you think of the issues and options presented?
- Are there other issues and options that should be considered?
- What do you see as the priorities and why?



Group discussion at the MDBA Leadership Summit, 2025

Where are we now?

The operating environment for the Basin Plan has changed substantially since 2012:

- a maturing environmental water portfolio
- increasing importance of landscape level approach
- a constrained fiscal environment
- a maturing approach to First Nations peoples' involvement
- a greater focus on accountability and compliance
- an improved knowledge base.

Together, these shifts create a more complex environment for the next decade of Basin water management.

The benefits of the Basin Plan are clearly emerging. The Commonwealth has recovered 20% of the Basin's consumptive water and this now forms water for the environment. It has helped internationally significant sites like Barmah-Millewa Forest, the Lower Lakes and other Ramsar-listed wetlands – stopping, and in some cases reversing their long-term decline.

However, some outcomes cannot be achieved with water only. Environmental flows cannot reach disconnected critical floodplains and wetlands due to physical constraints. Recovery of native fish populations also needs healthy habitats, river connectivity, and pests and barriers to be managed. More work is needed to improve the rules and regulations that constrain the use of water for the environment.

The review is happening against the backdrop of climate change. We are experiencing hotter temperatures and an underlying drying trend in the Basin with increasing variability and extreme events. We must improve our capacity to manage during dry times.

There is an obligation on all of us to engage with the evidence, acknowledge what parts of the Basin Plan are working and address its weaknesses where possible. We need to think clearly about priorities and respond flexibly to evidence as it emerges.

One area of focus for this review is advancing First Nations peoples rights and interests, moving beyond consultation to genuine participation in water management. Practical and effective measures to achieve this are an important objective for the Authority and Basin governments.

After a decade of significant change and policy interventions, Basin communities are generally seeking stability and consolidation of existing reforms. This will be an important consideration of the Authority in this review.

This review is an opportunity to reflect on how far Basin governments and communities have come and what has been achieved. The next decade will demand even greater collaboration to tackle the complex and multifaceted challenges the Basin faces.

Addressing Water Act requirements

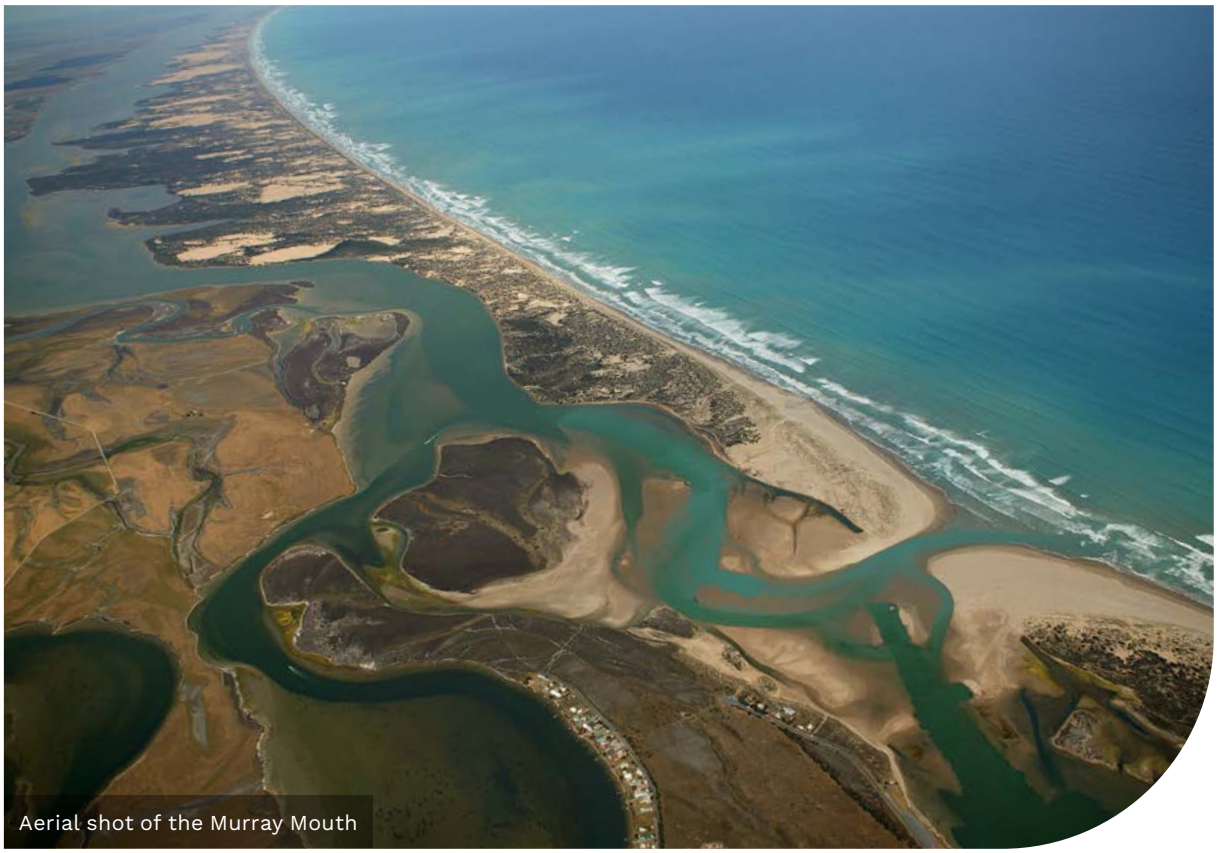
The Authority is required to consider the rights and interest of First Nations peoples and climate change risks when reviewing the Basin Plan.

First Nations rights and interests

The Authority is taking an approach that supports and works alongside the efforts of First Nations peoples and Basin governments, to strengthen First Nations peoples' participation in water management. The Authority is proposing to add to the Basin Plan's objectives and outcomes to reflect the First Nations purpose of the Basin Plan introduced via amendments to the Water Act in 2023. This will be supported by monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements to track progress over time.

Addressing climate change risks

As the climate becomes hotter and drier, we must prepare for periods of low water availability. Floods will still occur and bring some environmental benefits, but they can also cause significant damage and loss. Longer dry periods present a greater threat to the Basin's resilience under climate change. Through the Discussion Paper, the Authority is exploring options to improve drought preparedness by addressing water quality and river connectivity, strengthening planning for critical human water needs and strategically prioritising environmental watering. Given the importance of the 10-yearly review cycle, our approach is to assess and guide the management of Basin climate risks and enable climate change adaptation over the long term.



Aerial shot of the Murray Mouth

Evidence and issues

Chapter 2 of the Discussion Paper is about the evidence base and knowledge that underpins the Review. This includes the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation report, 2025 Murray-Darling Basin Outlook report and the initial SDL assessments.

Summary of initial SDL assessments

The initial SDL assessments are outlined at Chapter 3 of the Discussion Paper (Page 19).

Sustainable diversion limits (SDLs) sit at the centre of the Basin Plan and set the maximum volume that can be extracted from rivers and groundwater systems. By law, these limits must reflect an environmentally sustainable level of take (ESLT). There are 29 surface water and 80 groundwater SDL units across the Basin.

Initial surface water assessments

The initial assessment is that 21 of the 29 surface water SDLs continue to reflect an ESLT and support Basin Plan environmental outcomes.

The SDL units where there is concern that SDLs may not support environmental outcomes are:

- Barwon–Darling
- Lower Darling
- SA Murray

The SDL units where there is concern that there are environmental outcomes at risk are:

- Gwydir
- Murrumbidgee
- Goulburn
- NSW Murray
- Vic Murray.

The initial assessments show local and regional interventions are needed to address:

- inadequate base and low flows through the Barwon–Darling Menindee Lakes and into the Lower Darling, limiting river health and connectivity
- end-of-system outcomes in the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth
- poor wetland and floodplain condition, driven by insufficient inundation and physical barriers restricting connectivity
- declining native fish populations, exacerbated by habitat loss, barriers to movement, invasive species and poor water quality.

Initial groundwater assessments

The initial assessment is that 77 of the 80 groundwater units support environmental outcomes and reflect an ESLT.

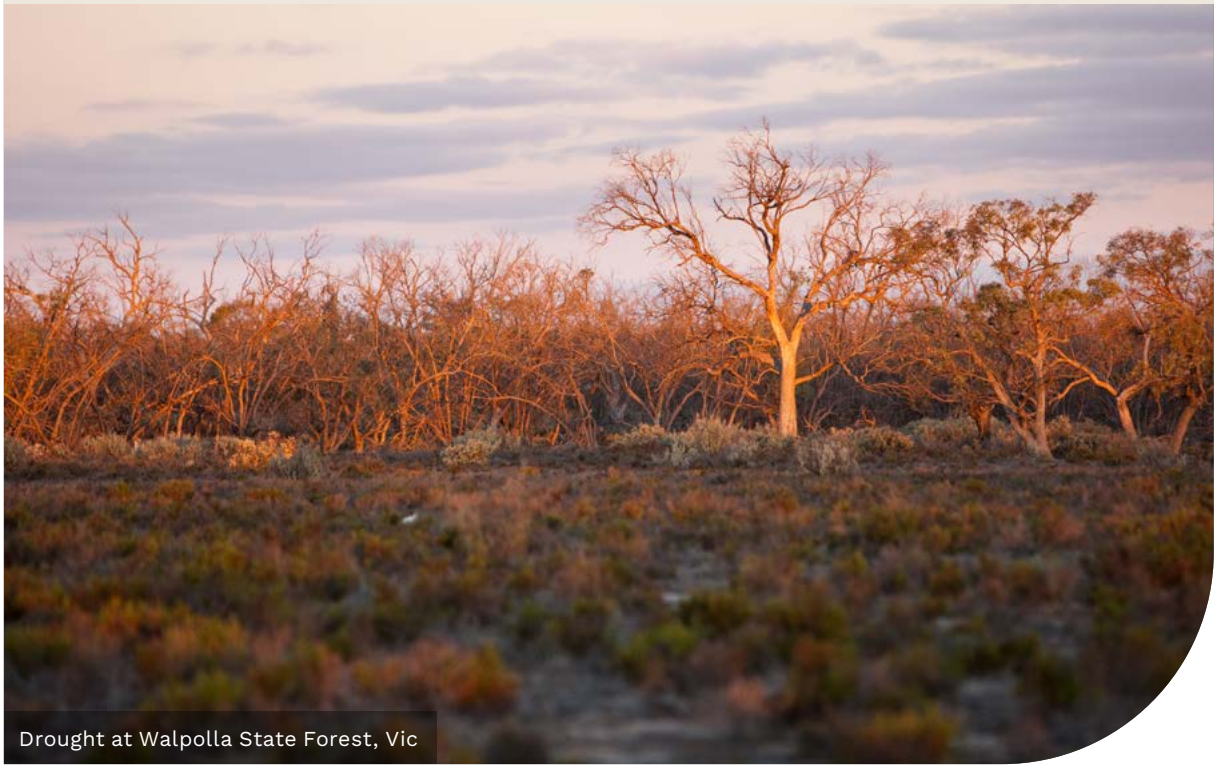
The groundwater SDL units where there is concern that SDLs may not support outcomes are:

- Lower Namoi Alluvium
- Upper Namoi Alluvium
- Lower Gwydir Alluvium

The Authority will be seeking to work directly with the New South Wales Government to ensure adequate rules and arrangements are in place for these units.

Summary

- SDL assessments for surface water have identified 4 priority issues for action – river connectivity in the northern Basin, end-of-system outcomes, floodplain and wetland health, and native fish decline.
- Further work is specifically required for 3 surface water SDL units to determine whether the SDL reflects an ESLT – the Barwon–Darling, Lower Darling and SA Murray.
- SDL assessments for groundwater show more work is needed in 3 groundwater SDL units, to determine whether the SDL reflects an ESLT. These are the Upper Namoi Alluvium, Lower Namoi Alluvium and the Lower Gwydir Alluvium.



Drought at Walpolla State Forest, Vic

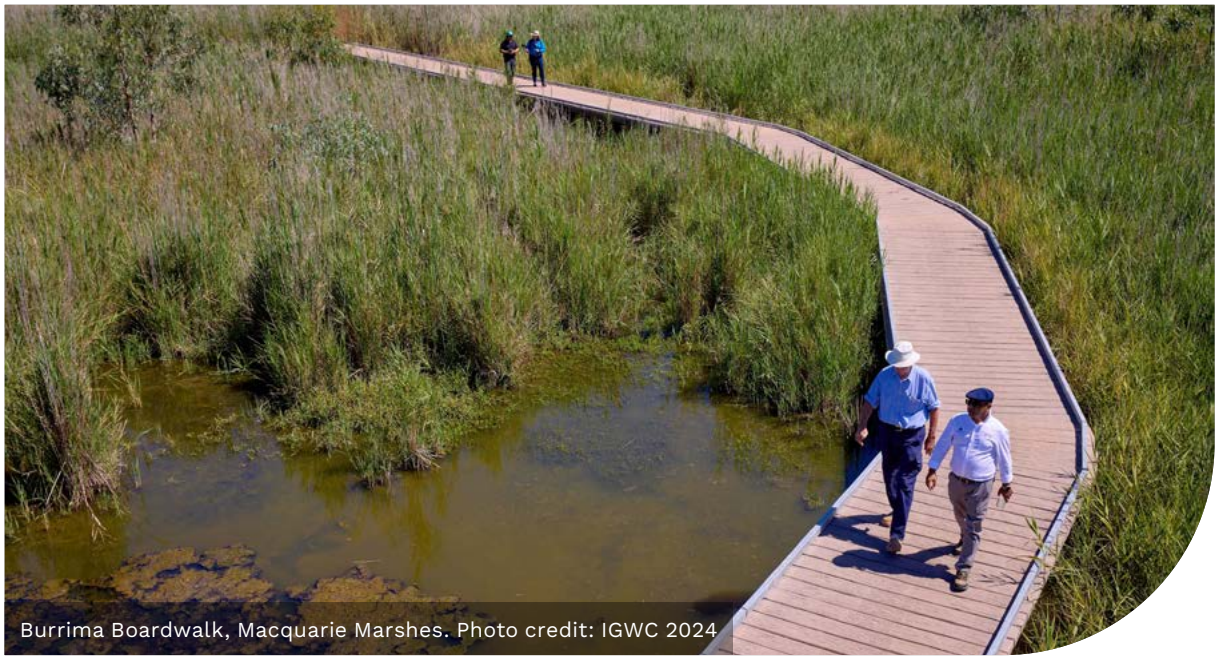
Options and future directions

Maximise the benefits of water for the environment

Chapter 4 (Page 37 of the Discussion Paper) presents options to strengthen how water for the environment is planned, prioritised, protected and delivered. The proposed changes aim to maximise the environmental, economic, Cultural and social benefits achieved with water for the environment across the Basin. Continuing to improve how water for the environment is managed is crucial to delivering outcomes under climate change.

Issues

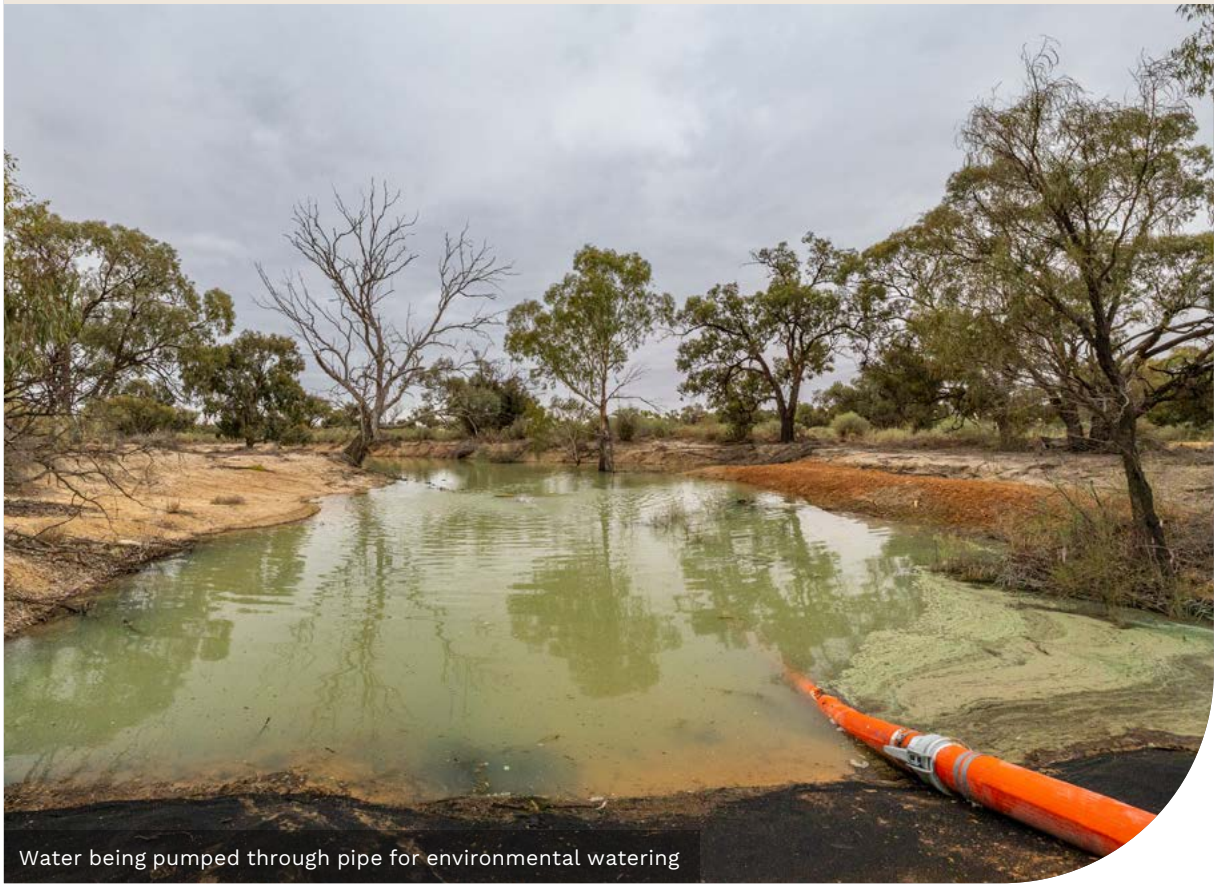
- **Coordinating and integrating with river operations**: there remains an ongoing challenge to integrate environmental water delivery needs into river operations systems. As river operators and environmental water managers improve how they work together, they will get better results from all water in the system.
- **Responding to climate change through clearer priorities**: climate change is very likely to make the Basin hotter and drier. Managers need clear priorities for environmental watering to respond to these changes, build drought resilience and direct environmental water to places where it brings the greatest benefit.
- **Enhancing First Nations involvement**: First Nations peoples have called for greater participation in planning for, delivering and monitoring environmental water. This will improve environmental outcomes, deliver Cultural benefits and help work towards healthier Water Country.
- **Driving investment in complementary measures**: land management actions such as pest control, fencing and revegetation, habitat restoration, fish passage, and grazing management need more integration with environmental watering. This would improve the benefits of environmental water and achieve the overall environmental objectives for critical sites.



Burrima Boardwalk, Macquarie Marshes. Photo credit: IGWC 2024

Proposed options

- Reduce duplication and inefficiency in preparing annual environmental watering priorities and long-term watering plans.
- Improve the Basin-wide environmental watering strategy to support strategic planning and transparent prioritisation of the environmental water portfolio.
- Make adaptation explicit in environmental water planning. Require long-term watering plans to identify vulnerable environmental outcomes and transitioning ecosystems and improve knowledge sharing through the environmental watering plans.
- Ensure environmental water is transparently accounted for and protected as it moves through the system.
- Invest in coordinated and transparent environmental water delivery and outcomes reporting.
- Strengthen First Nations peoples' involvement in planning, delivery and monitoring of water for the environment to deliver improved environment outcomes, and support Cultural, spiritual and community co-benefits.
- Embed First Nations knowledge into monitoring, evaluation and reporting processes.
- Enable environmental water holders to prioritise environmental watering in areas where land and water management actions are coordinated, where appropriate.



Water being pumped through pipe for environmental watering

Improve river connectivity in the northern Basin

Chapter 5 (Page 47 of the Discussion Paper) explores options to improve river connectivity in the northern Basin at critical times, while recognising flows in the rivers are highly variable and episodic.

The proposed changes respond to lessons learnt from the Tinderbox drought, which exposed the urgent need to improve river connectivity in the Barwon–Darling, Menindee Lakes and the Lower Darling (Baaka). As climate change brings more frequent and severe hydrological droughts, supporting connectivity will be essential to achieving the Basin Plan's environmental outcomes.

Issues

- **The health of the Menindee Lakes and Lower Darling (Baaka) has worsened over time**. Fish have died in mass events. Flows have stopped or stayed very low for long periods and water quality has declined. For example, in 2018–2019, thousands of fish died near Menindee due to low oxygen, barriers to fish movement, and low flows and high temperatures. These events show this system is losing its resilience.
- **Declining inflows from the northern Basin have harmed the health of the Menindee Lakes and Lower Darling**. Current operating rules, ageing infrastructure and management procedures add to the problem, and clash with local environmental and community needs. Together, these issues limit the system's ability to deliver important Basin Plan environmental outcomes.
- **The Menindee Review, jointly commissioned by Basin governments, is currently underway with consultation expected to begin in early 2026**. Given the support from local communities and Basin governments for the Menindee Review, the Authority's view is that this is the most comprehensive way to address these complex issues.

Proposed options

- Include objectives and outcomes in the Basin Plan that specifically support end-of-system connectivity in the northern Basin.
- Improve environmental water management, coordination and planning in the northern Basin.
- New South Wales improves river connectivity across connected catchments of the northern Basin.

Improve floodplain and wetland health

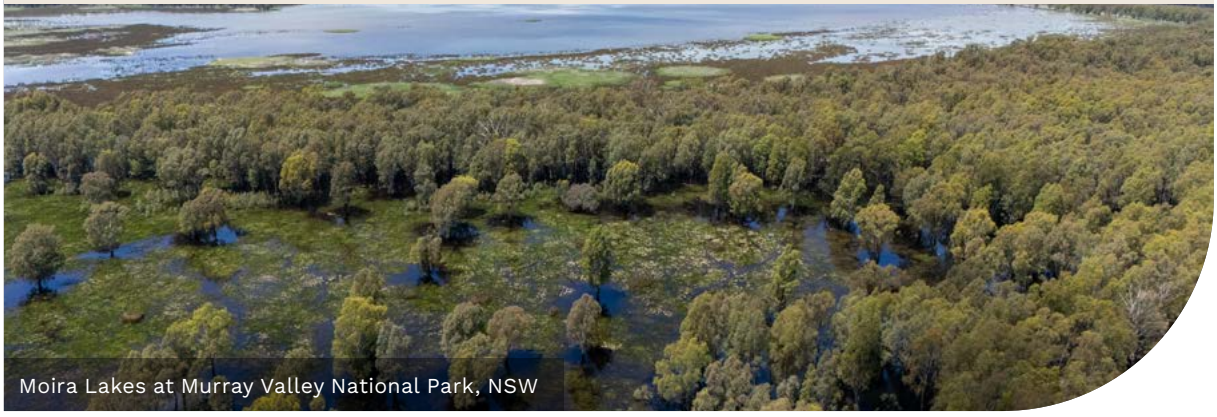
Chapter 6 (Page 52 of the Discussion Paper) proposes priorities for relaxing constraints to improve floodplain and wetland health, based on the lessons learnt over the past 14 years. The Authority proposes that governments continue to relax constraints in the Murrumbidgee and Gwydir. In the Goulburn Valley, the priority could be achieving bankfull flows, while in the Murray it could be gradual testing of higher flows.

Issues

- **Only a small proportion of water for the environment currently reaches floodplains**. Under a hotter and drier future, we expect floodplain forests and wetlands will contract unless we intervene.
- **Over the past 12 years, progress to relax constraints and connect floodplains and wetlands has been slow**. The complexity of delivering water for the environment across multiple Basin states, the need to balance delivery of these flows downstream with local impacts on rivers and private land, and the challenges of projects having to negotiate thousands of landholder agreements have all contributed to limited progress.
- **Constraints relaxation programs must provide stable funding and build trust through gradual, practical demonstrations of benefit**. Governance and accountability are also equally important. Projects should then scale up once trust builds with local communities, landholders and river operators – ensuring outcomes are technically feasible, socially acceptable and resilient.
- **The initial SDL assessment has found risks to floodplain health** in the New South Wales Murray, the Victorian Murray, the South Australian Murray, Goulburn, Murrumbidgee and Gwydir SDL units.

Proposed options

- Continue New South Wales's Murrumbidgee Reconnecting River Country program and extend the Gwydir Reconnecting Watercourse Country program beyond December 2026.
- Take practical steps to increase environmental flows in priority areas of the Goulburn and Murray, developed in consultation with, and supported by, local communities and landholders.



Moira Lakes at Murray Valley National Park, NSW

Responding to native fish decline

Chapter 7 (Page 58 of the Discussion Paper) explores options to improve native fish outcomes in the Basin. Priorities include fish-friendly river infrastructure, flow and connectivity, invasive species management, breeding and restocking, and habitat restoration. To stop the long-term decline of native fish, there must be a clear strategy and a commitment to prioritise effort and investment.

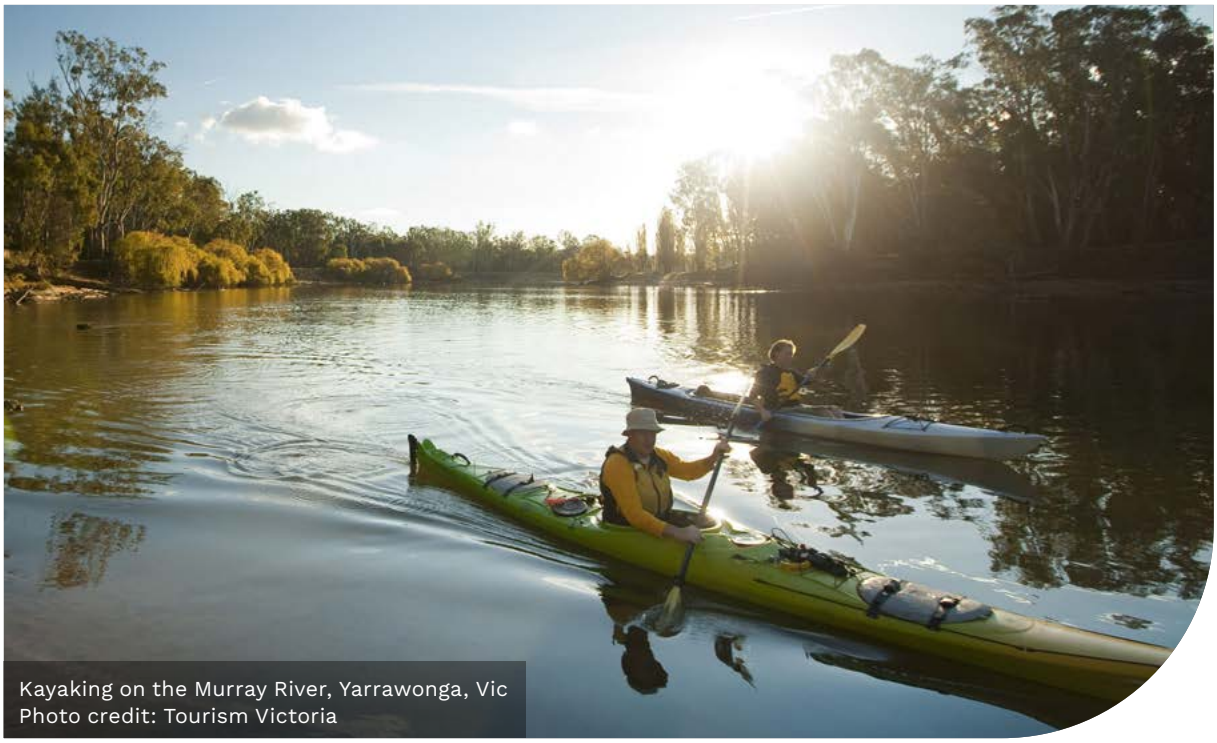
Issues

- Invasive species such as European carp have affected native fish populations
- Reduced connectivity between floodplains, wetlands and river channels has disrupted breeding and feeding cycles
- Loss of natural flow patterns has disrupted the triggers to key fish life cycle stages
- Poor water quality and altered flow regimes have degraded habitat
- Cold water from major storage dams have created unsuitable conditions for native fish
- Physical barriers such as dams, weirs and regulators have blocked fish movement and fragmented fish populations
- Irrigation diversion infrastructure (such as pumps) that draw in and kill native fish.

Proposed options

A combined and targeted rehabilitation package to restore native fish in priority locations in the Basin that:

- addresses barriers to fish passage and other hazards like irrigation diversion pumps
- ensures ongoing maintenance of existing fishways, particularly on the River Murray
- ensures there are multi-pronged approaches to managing invasive species such as carp
- invests in stocking, reintroduction and targeted recovery programs for rare and threatened species
- identifies priority instream and riparian habitat restoration areas to support native fish recovery.



Kayaking on the Murray River, Yarrawonga, Vic
Photo credit: Tourism Victoria

Managing water quality

Chapter 8 (Page 64 of the Discussion Paper) proposes options to improve water quality management, including updating the Basin Plan's objectives and targets. It also considers whether a more holistic approach is required to tackle water quality problems, particularly in high-risk areas across the Basin.

The Basin Plan on its own cannot prevent and manage all water quality problems, as many causes stem from land and catchment management. Mechanisms to better manage water quality risks are required, especially as climate change is expected to increase these risks.

Issues

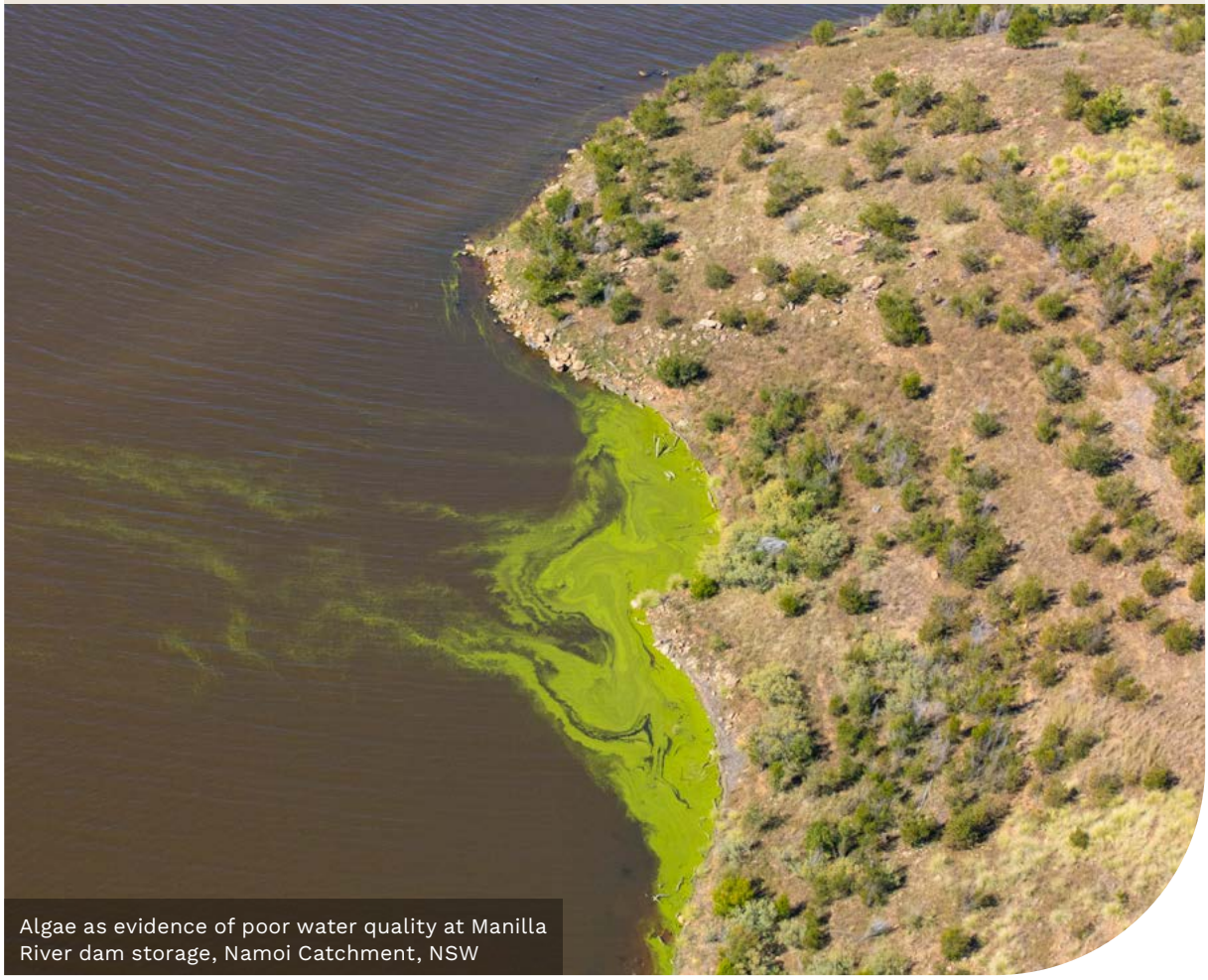
- **Basin communities, industries and local governments have told us they're concerned about water quality**. Poor water quality incidents are happening more often. Water quality risks are not well managed and better mitigation of land-based pollution sources is required. There is growing concern about the impact of poor water quality on First Nations peoples' health and wellbeing.
- **Water quality in the Basin is shaped by several drivers**, including land-use and management practices, invasive species and river regulation.
- **Climate change will place more pressure on Basin water quality**. Higher temperatures, more frequent and intense floods, longer and more frequent droughts and rising sea levels and more frequent storm surges in the Lower Lakes will add to water management challenges.
- **Responsibility for water quality across the Basin is fragmented across many different agencies**. Also, linkages between land planning and management in some cases are weak, which means that causes of poor water quality are not addressed effectively.

The Authority has identified hotspots where water quality issues arise, impacting Basin values. These include:

- Lake Hume and downstream
- mid-Murray (including Edward-Wakool)
- The Coorong
- northern Basin rivers above Menindee Lakes
- Menindee and Lower Darling

Proposed options

- Improve the Basin Plan water quality management plan, including strengthening water quality objectives and targets.
- Ensure Basin governments work together to manage Basin water quality hotspots by tackling the root causes of poor water quality and strengthen Basin governments' joint capacity for preventive action and early intervention.
- Develop opportunities for First Nations peoples to participate and contribute their science and knowledges to understanding water quality, including through monitoring programs.



Algae as evidence of poor water quality at Manilla River dam storage, Namoi Catchment, NSW

Water infrastructure and critical human water needs

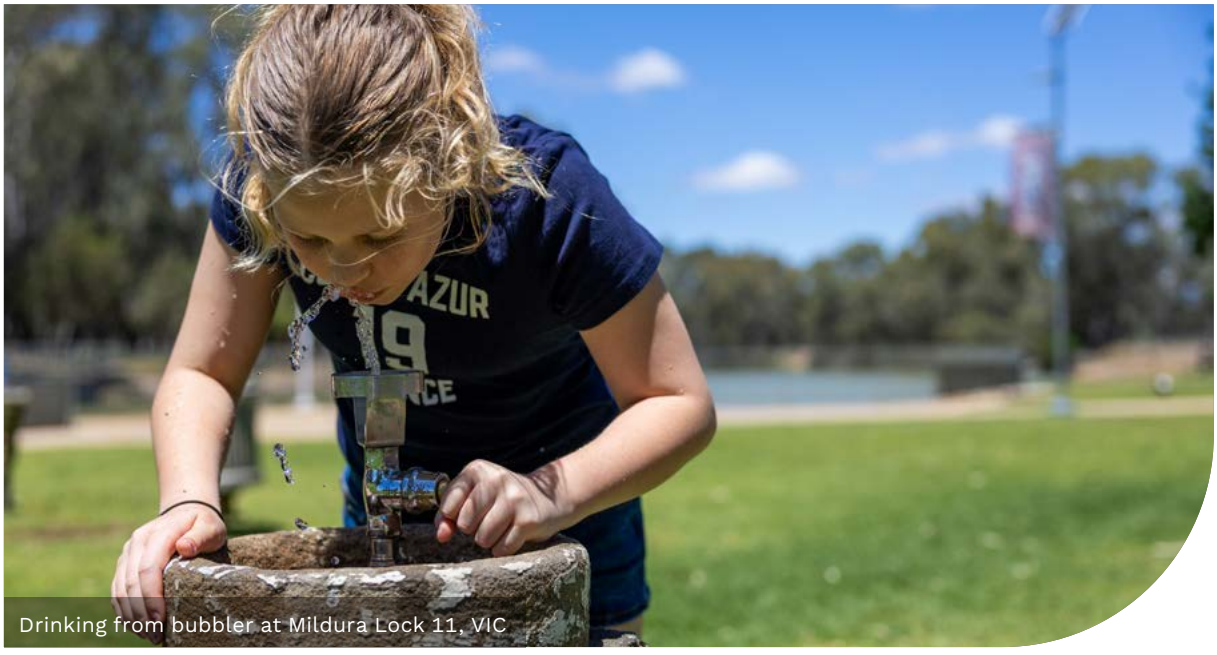
Chapter 9 (Page 69 of the Discussion Paper) highlights the risks of ageing water infrastructure and presents options to improve state-based planning for critical human water needs. Although critical to address, most of the Basin's infrastructure and water security challenges cannot be solved through the Basin Plan. Meaningful improvements will require sustained investment from Basin governments.

Issues

- **Water infrastructure is critical to water security and regional productivity**, however much of the southern Basin's river infrastructure such as River Murray's dams, the Murray Mouth barrages and salt interception schemes are near or passed its engineered life span and vulnerable to failure. Fit-for-purpose infrastructure is vital for all those who depend on Basin water resources. Current capital expenditure is well below the necessary level.
- **There are significant concerns about the reliability of town water supplies in the northern Basin**. As climate change intensifies, these communities will increasingly face reduced water availability and deteriorating water quality during low-flow periods, requiring more intensive and costly water treatment.

Proposed option

- Modernise water infrastructure across the Basin to reduce the risk of asset failure and safety risks, and to deliver on a broader range of values and interests, including improved Basin Plan outcomes.
- Consider minimum water resource plan requirements for state-based extreme event water planning to ensure adequate consultation processes and ensure planning is underpinned by robust climate assumptions.



Drinking from bubbler at Mildura Lock 11, VIC

Improve Basin Plan regulatory design

Chapter 10 (Page 74 of the Discussion Paper) outlines options to reform water resource plans (WRPs), improve sustainable diversion limit (SDL) accounting and reporting, refine Basin water trading rules and streamline reporting requirements. The aim is to regulate Basin state governments efficiently and effectively. This is essential for better outcomes.

Issues

- **Water resource plans are critical for maintaining protection of planned environmental water and ensuring compliance** however, the plans are costly and time-consuming to develop, assess and accredit, and Basin states have largely relied on existing water rules to meet WRP requirements. Community engagement in developing WRPs has also been inconsistent across Basin governments.
- **Basin Plan water trading rules are largely working as intended** however some adjustments would improve the existing rules and keep them in harmony with the other water trading reforms underway.
- **Basin Plan reporting can duplicate existing state-based reporting requirements without a clear purpose**. This creates administrative burden without improving Basin Plan outcomes. It needs to be streamlined. Updates are also needed to reflect the First Nations purpose of the Basin Plan and proposed new objectives and outcomes.

Proposed options

- Consider options to reform WRPs that include focusing on what matters most, to ensure more effective oversight of Basin states.
- Improve SDL compliance and accounting, including clarifying definitions and improving consistency and knowledge.
- Refine water trading rules to improve how exemptions for environmental water delivery work, support compliance and align with broader water market reforms.
- Streamline the Basin Plan to support compliance, outcomes assessment and adaptive management.

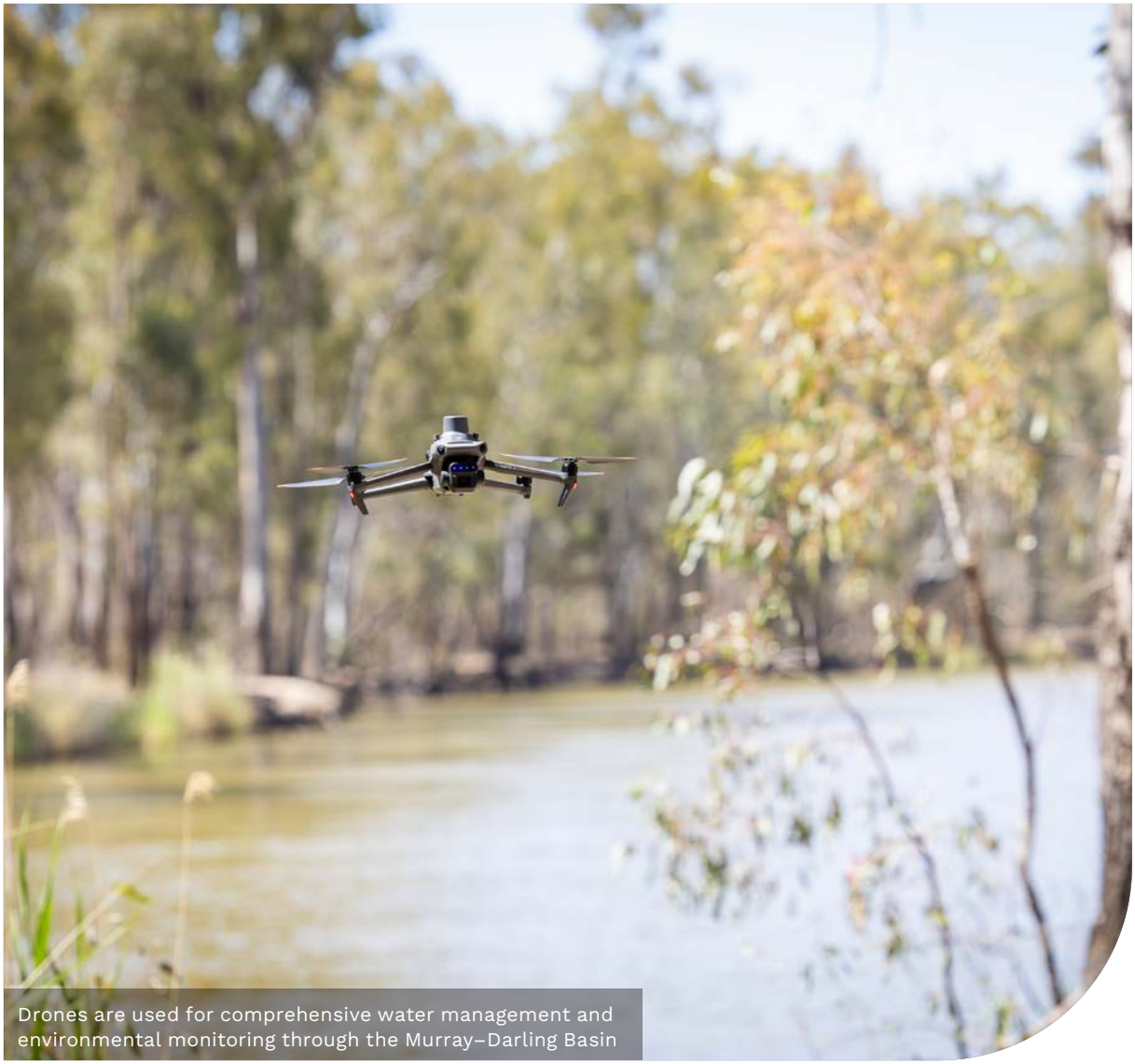
Cotton farm East of Hay, NSW

Improve science and knowledge to inform Basin water management

Chapter 11 (Page 81 of the Discussion Paper) outlines ways to ensure there is a robust information base for future decision-making in Basin water management. There are knowledge gaps, and better science and monitoring is needed. Addressing these will make future Basin water management more efficient and effective under climate change.

Issues

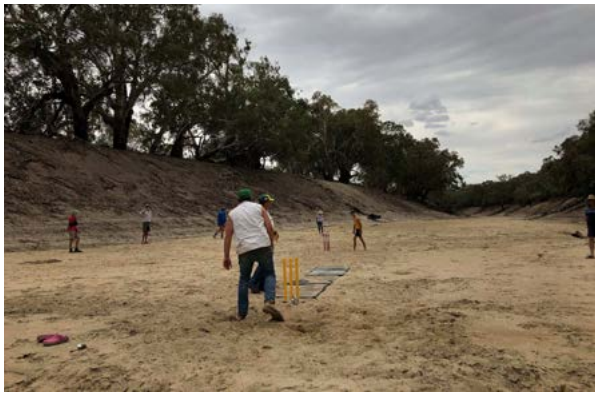
- Over the past decade, Basin governments, Basin communities, industry and researchers have significantly increased investment in science and information. These important investments have often been timebound, targeting specific issues or events, supplementing what has been a long-term decline in capability across the water research sector.
- Climate change creates major challenges for Basin water management. To respond well, we need sustained funding, better data, improved science and the ability to predict change to inform adaptive decision-making.



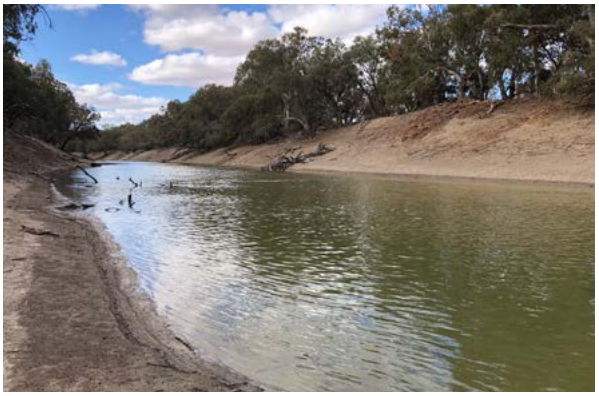
Drones are used for comprehensive water management and environmental monitoring through the Murray–Darling Basin

Proposed options

- Build understanding of the complexities and interactions of environmental, economic, social and Cultural outcomes in the Basin through sustained research capacity, community involvement, and a greater focus on science synthesis, collaboration and communication.
- Strengthen opportunities for First Nations peoples to contribute their science and knowledges.
- Monitor water flows, availability, and river connectivity, and how these interact with ecosystems and climate change, to ensure effective water planning and delivery across the Basin.
- Enhance groundwater knowledge across the Basin.
- Increase our knowledge on how native fish can be better protected at the Basin scale.
- Improve understanding of water quality drivers and impacts to deliver a greater predictive capacity, so water managers can pre-empt events.
- Address knowledge gaps preventing more targeted action shown by the SDL assessments relating to groundwater, environmental condition and non-water drivers.
- Improve methods for SDL accounting to more accurately estimate water take and future water demands.
- Improve modelling and predictive capacity by continuing collaborative development of models and forward-facing tools with Basin governments.



Residents of Wilcannia participate in a game of cricket where the Darling River has run dry during the Tinderbox drought in mid-April 2018.
Photo credit: ABC News: Tim Lee



Same location, 13 June 2018.
Photo credit: Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder

Box 12.2 How to have your say

You can make a submission on the issues in this Discussion Paper.

All feedback will be considered and will help shape the content and recommendations of the Review Report which will be published before the end of 2026.

Submissions made to the Authority will be published on its website unless the person specifically requests the submission, in part or full, is treated confidentially (more information below).

Consultation period

We are accepting submissions from 5 February 2026 until 5pm AEST 1 May 2026.

We will publish a 'what we heard' report summarising the submissions and feedback we received during the public consultation period.

How to make a submission

Please read our submissions guideline (getinvolved.mdba.gov.au/2026basinplanreview) before you get started.

There are several ways you can make a submission.

Online: Visit our website to upload your submission: getinvolved.mdba.gov.au/2026basinplanreview

Post: Send your submission to us by post:

Basin Plan Review submissions
Murray–Darling Basin Authority
GPO Box 1801
Canberra City ACT 2601

Email: BPRsubmissions@mdba.gov.au

For any questions about the submissions process, you can:

- Contact us via our website: mdba.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/got-question-use-our-form
- Call us on 1800 230 067

Confidentiality

If you want your submission kept confidential and not published on the Authority's website, please indicate this in the submission coversheet.

You can change your preference at any time by contacting the Authority, including after publication.

Contact us via our website: mdba.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/got-question-use-our-form

Find out more

You can find out more by visiting the website, watching a webinar or contacting us.

Call **1800 230 067** or contact us via our website: mdba.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/got-question-use-our-form to speak with the team or arrange a meeting during the consultation period.

You can stay informed and be part of our progress

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