



Australian Government



Murray-Darling
Basin
Authority



2026 Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review

First Nations Discussion Paper snapshot



Published by the Murray–Darling Basin Authority
MDBA publication no: 1/26
ISBN (online): 978-1-923558-22-9
ISBN (print): 978-1-923558-23-6

© Murray–Darling Basin Authority 2026

Ownership of intellectual property rights

With the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, the MDBA logo, trademarks and any exempt photographs and graphics (these are identified), this publication is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)

The Australian Government acting through the Murray–Darling Basin Authority has exercised due care and skill in preparing and compiling the information and data in this publication. Notwithstanding, the Murray–Darling Basin Authority, its employees and advisers disclaim all liability, including liability for negligence and for any loss, damage, injury, expense or cost incurred by any person as a result of accessing, using or relying upon any of the information or data in this publication to the maximum extent permitted by law.

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority's preference is that you attribute this publication (and any Murray–Darling Basin Authority material sourced from it) using the following wording within your work:

Cataloguing data

Title: 2026 Murray–Darling Basin Plan Review, First Nations Discussion Paper snapshot, Murray–Darling Basin Authority Canberra, 2026. CC BY 4.0

Accessibility

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority makes its documents and information available in accessible formats. On some occasions the highly technical nature of the document means that we cannot make some sections fully accessible. If you encounter accessibility problems or the document is in a format that you cannot access, please contact us.





Acknowledgement of First Nations and their people

We offer respect to the Traditional Custodians of Country in the Murray–Darling Basin and to their Nations. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We acknowledge First Nations peoples' enduring deep Cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and economic connection to their lands and waters.

First Nations peoples have been looking after Country in sophisticated ways for more than 65,000 years and continue to do so on behalf of their Nations and people.

We have heard many First Nations people express that when the lands and waters of their Nations are not healthy, the people are unwell, and the ability to practise Culture and look after Country is impacted. This includes being able to swim in the local waterways and harvest traditional foods and resources.

First Nations peoples see waterways as living entities and live by the principle that everything is connected. Since colonisation, land, water and people have been separated. This goes against the way First Nations peoples see Country.

First Nations peoples of the Basin have been excluded from decision-making processes about water. Water management laws have contributed to disparity and dispossession, as they were developed without recognising First Nations' sovereignty. We acknowledge that this causes recurring distress.



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 inform stakeholders and Basin communities, invite feedback and shape the development of 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.

About this snapshot

This snapshot is intended to provide a quick overview of the Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper and the issues important to First Nations peoples.

What we heard

Through meetings on Country, First Nations led research and workshops and Basin Gatherings with Nation representatives, the MDBA had the opportunity to listen to First Nations peoples' priorities and ideas. The key things we have heard from First Nations peoples include:

- First Nations rights are very poorly recognised, and their involvement in water and environmental decision-making is very limited
- poor river health, lack of river connectivity, mass fish deaths, and drought has decreased community wellbeing for First Nations peoples who depend on healthy Country for Cultural practices and spiritual wellbeing
- there are growing concerns about the impacts of poor water quality on First Nations peoples' health and wellbeing
- unsafe drinking water and loss of access to water sources for Cultural practices
- the quality and consistency of engagement vary widely depending on the jurisdiction
- participation in water resource management planning is often limited to the preparation of the plans
- tangible on-the-ground outcomes for First Nations peoples has been slow. The overall view of First Nations people is progress towards achieving their aspirations has been limited
- in some Basin states, there are now more opportunities for some First Nations peoples to participate, particularly in environmental water management. Where this happens, both communities and the environment benefit.

Our approach to the 2026 Basin Plan Review

The Authority's approach for the Basin Plan Review is to support and work alongside the efforts of First Nations peoples and Basin governments.

This approach has been developed after listening to what First Nations representatives have told us is important to their Nations and communities, including their desire to be involved in all aspects of water management at the local, catchment and Basin scale. For Basin scale management, this could be achieved through a strategic and structured approach to elevating First Nations voices.

We are guided by our commitment to:

- support existing agreements between governments and First Nations peoples, such as the **National Agreement on Closing the Gap**
- align with agreed national and state water policies that seek to **elevate First Nations voices**
- respect **Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property**, and ensure culturally safe and enabling spaces for participation
- support **self-determination** through processes that involve First Nations peoples in setting priorities and strategies, including through free, prior and informed consent.

The Authority proposes to add to the Basin Plan's overall objectives and outcomes to reflect the First Nations purpose of the Basin Plan, supported by robust monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements to track progress over time.

The additional purpose of the Basin Plan is to provide:

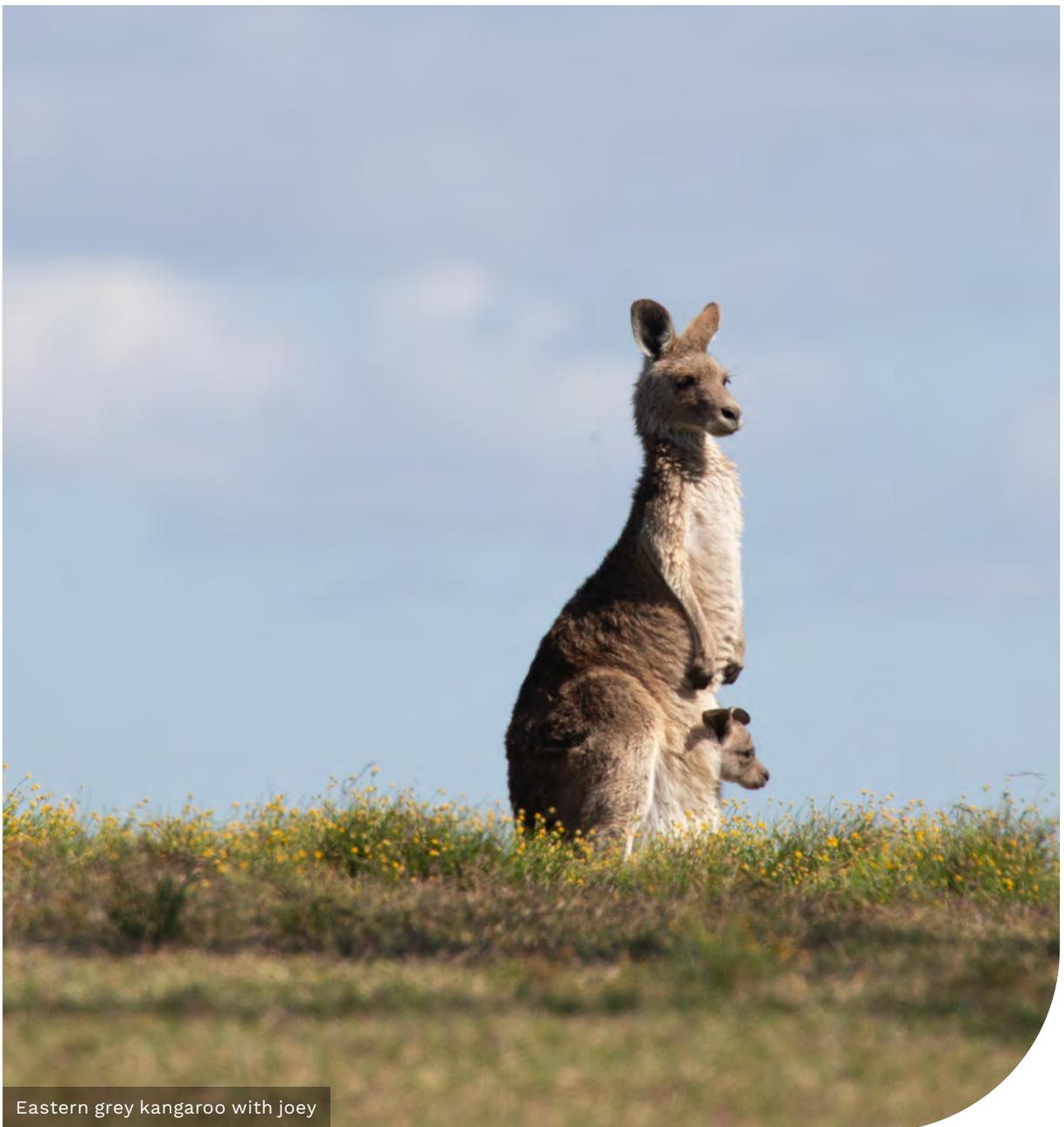
“for the use and management of Basin water resources that takes into account spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic matters relevant to Indigenous people.”

The proposed changes recognise and protect First Nations interests, support opportunities for First Nations participation in developing priorities and strategies guided by the principle of free, prior and informed consent, and recognise First Nations peoples' science and knowledges.

To implement these objectives and outcomes, the Authority is considering options to strengthen opportunities for First Nations peoples' participation and outcomes.

These include:

- **recognition and rights:** update the Basin Plan’s acknowledgement of Traditional Owners and recognise their connection to the Basin’s rivers and groundwater in the Basin Plan
- **decision-making processes:** increase First Nations peoples’ inclusion in water planning and management, including at state, regional and local scale, through clear processes underpinned by free, prior and informed consent
- **environmental water management:** expand First Nations participation in environmental water planning, delivery and monitoring from the local to Basin scale
- **knowledge and monitoring:** enable opportunities for First Nations peoples to be ethically involved in, and contribute, their science and knowledges, in Basin Plan monitoring, evaluation and reporting.



Eastern grey kangaroo with joey

Maximising the benefits of water for the environment

This chapter 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.

First Nations peoples have called for greater involvement in environmental water planning, delivery and monitoring. Stronger partnerships between First Nations peoples and environmental water holders can deliver better environmental and Cultural and spiritual outcomes, enable Traditional Owners to care for Country, and ensure First Nations science and knowledges are valued and ethically inform water management decisions.

Proposed improvements include:

- enabling First Nations peoples' participation including via free, prior and informed consent, in the development and review of the Basin-wide environmental watering strategy
- require the Authority to promote genuine partnerships between First Nations peoples and environmental water managers in environmental water planning, delivery and monitoring including in opportunities for on-Country activities and shared decision-making
- changing the voluntary principles applied to water for the environment, to ensure environmental watering priorities take into account First Nations peoples' rights and interests
- requiring Basin states to involve First Nations peoples in the preparation of long term watering plans, ethically and respectfully considering and valuing First Nations peoples' knowledge. This includes when identifying priority environmental assets, ecological objectives and targets, and environmental watering requirements
- requiring the Authority to report on how it has taken First Nations spiritual, Cultural, environmental, social and economic matters into account when reviewing the Basin-wide environmental watering strategy.



Singing honey eater sitting on a bush

Improving river connectivity in the northern Basin

This chapter 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.

Reduced river connectivity has a range of impacts including to:

- river health and the capacity of rivers to recover from drought
- native fish populations
- the physical, Cultural and spiritual wellbeing of First Nations peoples.

To support stronger connectivity outcomes in the northern Basin, the Authority is exploring whether the Basin Plan should include specific connectivity objectives and outcomes at points along the Barwon-Darling, such as Walgett, Bourke, Brewarrina and Wilcannia.

The Menindee Review, jointly commissioned by Basin governments, is currently underway and the Authority’s view is that this is the most comprehensive way to address these complex issues affecting the health of the Menindee Lakes and Lower Darling (Baaka). For more information on the progress of this work, see the Menindee Review.



Honey bee gathering nectar in the wetlands

Responding to native fish decline

This chapter 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.

The decline of native fish is a significant concern to all Basin communities. We have heard from First Nations peoples that mass fish deaths – such as those in 2023 in the Lower Darling (Baaka) River – are a deeply distressing symptom of poor river health and long-term decline.

A combined and targeted rehabilitation package is needed 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 manage invasive species such as carp
- invests in stocking, reintroduction and targeted recovery programs for rare and threatened species
- identifies priority in-stream and riparian habitat restoration areas to support native fish recovery.



Fish ecologists check their nets after watering event

Managing water quality

This chapter 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 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.

There is also growing concern about the impacts of poor water quality on First Nations peoples' health and wellbeing. First Nations peoples have told us:

- poor water quality and invasive species have resulted in the loss of native fish, including catfish and cod, which is eroding connection to Country
- mass fish deaths in the Lower Darling (Baaka) in 2018–19 had profound impacts on the Barkindji people
- poor water quality limits Cultural practices of fishing, swimming and drinking directly from the river
- passing down teachings and traditions to younger generations becomes difficult when Cultural sites are degraded
- poor water quality has negative health implications, with communities having to drink bottled water, the loss of traditional food sources, and people becoming ill after drinking river water or swimming
- they want to be involved in decision-making on water quality and in monitoring and testing
- they are concerned there is no accountability for impacts on water quality.

The Authority is considering options to make sure First Nations peoples have opportunities to be involved in water quality management. These include:

- increasing our understanding of how poor water quality affects First Nations peoples' health and connection to Country
- investigating the inclusion of a specific First Nations Cultural water quality objective in the Basin Plan
- improving First Nations peoples participation, including via free, prior and informed consent, in water quality planning, testing, monitoring and management.
- ethically incorporating First Nations science and knowledges in local water quality management, environmental water management and monitoring and evaluation.

In response to concerns from First Nations peoples across the Basin about the ways that poor water quality affects their health and wellbeing, the Authority is committed to working with First Nations peoples, Basin state governments and Australian Government agencies to identify an appropriate pathway for concerns to be further investigated.

Basin Plan regulatory design

This chapter outlines options to reform water resource plans, improve sustainable diversion limit 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.

The Basin Plan Evaluation found that Basin state governments need to genuinely consider and address First Nations objectives when developing water resource plans, and to progress First Nations peoples' involvement in all parts of water management. The Basin Plan Evaluation found that this engagement has been inconsistent and restricted to planning. Progress towards genuine, ongoing participation and tangible outcomes for First Nations peoples has been slow.

First Nations peoples have told us the health of Water Country depends on the involvement of First Nations peoples in every step of water planning and management and the benefits for all when their contributions are valued. First Nations peoples are looking to the Basin Plan to provide an **accountable and transparent** framework with stronger expectations for how Basin states should support First Nations peoples' participation in local water planning and management. This is consistent with the First Nations purpose of the Basin Plan and the broader Australian Government policy context, including the **National Agreement on Closing the Gap** and the **draft National Water Agreement**.

In reforming water resource plans (WRPs), the Authority is also considering how WRPs can be used to encourage existing and new partnerships between Basin states and First Nations peoples. Through either of options 1 and 2 described in the Discussion Paper, there is an opportunity to enhance First Nations participation and improve conditions, ensuring that:

- processes are sufficiently flexible and support genuine engagement, with features including
 - *who* is consulted or involved (drawing on self-determination of First Nations representation),
 - *how* (embedding the principles of free, prior and informed consent) and
 - *when* (ensuring there is clarity on process including defined commencement and completion steps)
- water management practices reflect the First Nations purpose of the Basin Plan and support First Nations objectives and outcomes, for each WRP area
- Inspector-General of Water Compliance oversight of obligations to matters relevant to First Nations peoples under the Water Act and Basin Plan
- implementation plans that provide opportunities for First Nations people's participation in developing and determining water management priorities and strategies, with transparent reporting on progress.

Basin water trading rules

The Basin Plan provides a framework for water trade that aims to reduce trade restrictions, improve transparency and enhance water market confidence.

The Authority is considering adjustments to improve the existing rules and keep them in harmony with the other water trading reforms underway. Proposed refinements include enabling trade restrictions to protect Cultural Heritage. This adjustment brings the Basin Plan into alignment with the *Water Act 2007* (Cth). Any restrictions later imposed by Basin states in line with their Cultural heritage arrangements should be developed with First Nations peoples to make sure the trade restrictions are practical, culturally appropriate and supported by affected First Nations peoples.



Egret in the wetlands

Basin Plan reporting

Monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement is part of the water management cycle. It supports compliance, outcomes assessment and adaptive management.

Streamlining reporting is needed for compliance, outcomes assessment and adaptive management. Updates are needed to reflect the First Nations purpose of the Basin Plan and proposed new objective and outcomes. Options to improve Basin Plan reporting include:

- consolidating reviews into 5-yearly cycles and stopping low-value annual reports
- strengthening linkages between local, regional and Basin-scale reporting
- adding new principles to encourage Basin governments to support participation of First Nations people, including via free, prior and informed consent, and for the ethical inclusion of the science and knowledges
- supporting opportunities for First Nations led evaluation and on-ground projects, improved social and economic impact analysis, with culturally appropriate reporting
- improving access to information and ensuring that Basin Plan information is clear, useful and supports adaptive decision-making by governments, communities, including First Nations peoples and industry
- ensuring the Inspector-General of Water Compliance receives the information needed to conduct risk-based oversight and compliance.



Fresh water turtle on a log

Improving science and knowledge to inform Basin water management

This chapter outlines options 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.

The 2026 Basin Plan Review is informed by the best available scientific knowledge. Even so, there are gaps in information and knowledge that must be addressed for effective management of Basin water resources, including future reviews of the Basin Plan.

Opportunities to better inform Basin water management decisions include partnerships with First Nations peoples to ethically include their science and knowledges to gain richer insights on challenges such as climate, fish health, water quality and environmental outcomes.



Royal spoonbill adult and chick

How can you have your say?

The Discussion Paper sets out options – not final decisions. We invite communities, industries, First Nations peoples and Basin governments to discuss the issues and options with us.

We invite you to share your views:

- 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?

All feedback will be considered to help shape the recommendations of the Basin Plan Review Report.

How to make a submission

Submissions are open from 5 February 2025 until 5.00 pm AEST 1 May 2026.

Make a submission

You can make a submission online, by email, or by mail. All submissions must be received by 5.00 pm AEST 1 May.

Online Go to: getinvolved.mdba.gov.au/2026basinplanreview

Email Send to: BPRSubmissions@mdba.gov.au with BPR Submission in the subject

Mail Basin Plan Review Submissions
Murray-Darling Basin Authority
GPO Box 1801
Canberra City ACT 2601



What happens to my submission?

All submissions will be published on the MDBA website, unless you have requested for your submission, or part of your submission, to be confidential. You can make this request through the online submission form or submission template.

The MDBA's use of submissions containing Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) material will be governed by a separate ICIP Consent Agreement that forms part of the submissions form.

The submissions we receive will inform the content for a report on what we heard during the consultation and be used to develop the Basin Plan Review report and recommendations to government at the end of 2026.

Contact us

For any questions about the submissions process, you can:

- go to mdba.gov.au >About us> Contact us and fill in the [contact form](#)
- call 1800 230 067 (free call)

You can keep up to date through our online socials via LinkedIn, X and Facebook.



Summary of legislative requirements

The *Water Act 2007* (Cth) sets out the following requirements for the conduct of the Basin Plan Review.

Section 50 of the Water Act provides for regular 10-yearly reviews of the Basin Plan, containing the triggers for conduct of the Review, and requirements relating to publication and communication of the final Review report (the Authority is required to publish a final Review report, which will be given to the Australian Government Minister responsible for Water, provided to relevant state ministers for each Basin state government, and published on the Authority's website). This section also makes it clear that in conducting the Review, the Authority must consider and report on certain matters.

Section 50 requires that certain matters are considered and addressed in the Review. These are:

- matters relevant to First Nations peoples in relation to the management of Basin water resources, including the extent to which Basin water resources could be managed to improve the spiritual, environmental, Cultural, social and economic conditions of Indigenous peoples
- the extent to which the Basin Plan recognises and protects the interests of Indigenous peoples
- the extent to which the Basin Plan supports opportunities for Indigenous people to participate in determining and developing priorities and strategies for the development or use of Basin water resources
- management of climate change risks.

Section 51 of the Water Act outlines the consultation requirements of the Basin Plan Review. The Authority is required to:

- consult with Basin states, the Basin Officials Committee and the Basin Community Committee in preparing a Discussion Paper in relation to the Review
- publish a Discussion Paper setting out the issues being addressed in the Review
- provide a copy of the Discussion Paper to the relevant state minister for each of the Basin states and invite submissions
- invite members of the public to make submissions, providing at least a 12-week public consultation period
- publish those submissions (unless confidential) and consider them.

In conducting the review, the Authority is considering whether the Basin Plan is delivering on its purposes, as set out in section 20 of the Water Act. The Water Act contemplates that the Basin Plan will provide for the management of Basin water resources in an integrated way that promotes the objects of the Act, and which provides for:

- giving effect to relevant international agreements
- establishment and enforcement of environmentally sustainable limits of water use
- environmental objectives for important ecosystems and for water quality and salinity
- use and management of Basin water resources in a way that optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes
- use and management of Basin water resources that takes into account the spiritual, Cultural, environmental, social, and economic matters relevant to First Nations peoples (this is a new purpose introduced in 2023 and an important area of focus for the Basin Plan Review)
- efficient water markets
- requirements for water resource plans
- improved water security for all uses of Basin water resources.



You can stay informed and be part of our progress

Subscribe now for relevant updates or opportunities to have your say.

Follow us to stay up to date:

X: [@MD_Basin_Auth](https://twitter.com/MD_Basin_Auth)

Facebook: facebook.com/MDBAuth

LinkedIn: au.linkedin.com/company/murray-darling-basin-authority



Australian Government



**Murray-Darling
Basin
Authority**

Office location | First Nations Country

Adelaide | Kurna Country

Albury | Wiradjuri Country

Canberra | Ngunnawal Country

Goondiwindi | Bigambul Country

Griffith | Wiradjuri Country

Mildura | Latji Latji Country

Murray Bridge | Ngarrindjeri Country

Website: www.mdba.gov.au

Phone: 1800 630 114 (Toll free)

Email: engagement@mdba.gov.au