



THE
WATERWAYS
NETWORK

Submission: Review of the Murray Darling Basin Plan

Date: 1 May 2026

Confidential treatment: has not been requested

Summary: The review includes a national perspective, climate change, better governing and governance that considers local community groups, healthy species populations, maintain water in waterways and considering waterways as complex, connected integrated living entities.

Supporting documents: No

Request to be heard: No

About The Waterways Network (TWN)

The Waterways Network is a community practice that considers how flows, rivulets, creeks, streams, and rivers form a connected network across the landscape of Australia that is fundamental to the health of our environment. The ecological integrity of the landscape is indispensable to the health of the world in which we live, and water is the critical ingredient in that integrity. The TWN is committed to understanding water as landscape flows in an Australia-wide context in all its variability and through the similarities and differences between basins, climatic zones, and jurisdictions.

Endorsements

The Waterways Network endorses the following submissions:

- Heartblood Alliance
- Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists
- Emeritus Professor Ray Ison

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The rewritten Basin Plan addresses the national context of water policy and considers all relevant catchment including those currently undergoing economic development, such as the major rivers and aquifers in the Northern Territory.

Recommendation 2: The revised Basin Plan explicit includes and assesses the impact climate change on waterways and on the provisions in the plan.

Recommendation 3: The revised Basin Plan explicit includes in the governing of the Basin (and funding for) local environmental (often volunteer) groups, both as advocates and as land regenerators, who are independent (of financial interests) keepers of on-ground knowledge.

Recommendation 4: The revised Basin Plan includes measures to sustain healthy populations of existing common species as well as considering threatened and endangered species.

Recommendation 5: The revised Basin Plan addresses the issue of protecting water flows so the catchment can take best advantage of flood flows as and when they happen.

Recommendation 6: The revised Basin Plan addresses governance (and governing) and transparency, based on adequate monitoring.

Recommendation 7: The revised Basin Plan addresses waterways as complex integrated, self-regulating living entities that combine into a whole greater than the sum of the parts.

Details of recommendations

Recommendation 1

The rewritten Basin Plan addresses the national context of water policy, and considers all relevant catchment including those currently undergoing economic development, such as the major rivers and aquifers in the Northern Territory.

As nationally important waterway, funded with Federal funds contributed by all Australians the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) must consider a national lens on waterways and place the Basin in the context of all other waterways in terms of policy and also in terms of ecology and geomorphology. For the expenditure on the MDB to be justified to the community the work – the successes and failures – must address national water policy, after all the MDB is merely on seventh of the continent. More people live in the Yarra catchment than in the Murray Darling. The current plan is disconnect from what is happening elsewhere in the country. The revised plan needs to inform and be informed by all other catchments. Our weather is both nation and global, and the uniqueness of every catchment needs to be understood as well as the commonalities. Policy is policy, however, wherever it applies. Acknowledge the uniqueness of say the tropical areas, which effectively have. And the question beyond boosterism needs to be addressed about what really makes MDB unique?

Recommendation 2

The revised Basin Plan explicit includes and assesses the impact climate change on waterways and on the provisions in the plan.

This is covered adequately in other submissions. It is an absurdity to exclude the plan from climate change considerations, especially considering state and federal governments commitments to renewable energy based on climate change.

Recommendation 3

The revised Basin Plan explicit includes in the governing of the Basin (and funding for) local environmental (often volunteer) groups, both as advocates and as land regenerators, who are independent (of financial interests) keepers of on-ground knowledge.

The rewritten Basin Plan must include explicit provisions for systemic governing at the regional and catchment scale and the local scale, not only at the Basin-wide Commonwealth level. Local community environment groups and Catchment Management Authorities and their equivalents, and must be adequately resourced, empowered to exercise and contribute to genuine adaptive management. Community is more than local landholders and farming operations.

Recommendation 4

The revised Basin Plan includes measures to sustain healthy populations of existing common species as well as considering threatened and endangered species.

The emphasis on threatened and endangered species while important needs to be mitigated by a concern for the conservation of populations of common species, sometimes also culturally important species. This consideration needs to be explicitly considered in the revised Basin Plan, not merely assumed. The experience of nature is driven by the common visible species in numbers. Common species can become threatened species and the trajectory is more effectively addressed

Recommendation 5

The revised Basin Plan addresses the issue of protecting water flows so the catchment can take best advantage of flood flows as and when they happen.

Much of the basin ecology is dependent on floods and the coincidence of flooding to reach and rewater flood plains and wetlands. For this to be effective flows in waterways need to be protected so the flooding is ecologically effective.

Recommendation 6

The revised Basin Plan addresses governance (and governing) and transparency, based on adequate monitoring.

This is addressed both in Professor Ray Ison's submission and in Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists submission. Processes need to be transparent and accountable to those both in the basin and those outside the basin, including local and regional environment groups. We support expanded compliance resourcing to ensure the effectiveness of the plan. Environmental groups need to be resourced to understand the complexities of the plan in detail and over time. Water is a complex area that requires a bank of knowledge to engage with.

Recommendation 7

The revised Basin Plan addresses waterways as complex integrated, self-regulating living entities that combine into a whole greater than the sum of the parts.

The living entity thinking is a literal truth for indigenous communities as I understand it, and a truth reflected in the deep histories of all peoples. It is a way of effectively re-thinking our collective relationship with waterways to understand them as more than separate individual components but complexly integrated. This thinking came initially from the Wurundjeri who advocated successfully for its inclusion in the Yarra River Protection (Willip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act, and it has since expanded into planning schemes and an intended inclusion in Victorian legislation. It has a broad poetic truth that has driven better policy outcomes and its acknowledgment in the revised Basin Plan will enable a more holistic approach to policy.

Yours sincerely,



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