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Media Release

\$100m to Revive our Rivers urges new campaign

An estimated \$100 million would buy back enough water for the environment to throw a lifeline to Murray-Darling Basin rivers and get the Basin Plan back on track, new analysis by the Lifeblood Alliance has found.

“The Basin plan is currently 47.5 billion litres short of the legal water recovery target, a volume of water that could easily be bought using unspent money from the Murray-Darling Basin Plan,” **Life Blood Alliance spokesperson Bev Smiles said.**¹

“For about \$100 million we could go a long way to reviving the river system that is the lifeblood for thousands of people and many regional economies.

“In the context of the billions now being spent supporting the community through the coronavirus pandemic, it is small change and the money has already been put aside.”

A diverse range of community interests including farmers, graziers, horticulturalists, irrigators and indigenous people from across the Murray-Darling Basin are calling for urgent action so the Basin Plan, legally activated in July 2019, has the agreed level of water recovery to revive our rivers.

[video link: <https://youtu.be/FTBVQYRSaXM>]²

Lifeblood Alliance has launched a new public campaign to emphasise that the government must adopt buybacks as the fastest, cheapest and most effective way of meeting Basin Plan outcomes.

Ms Smiles said: “People from all walks of life are very willing to advocate for the water buyback program to be reinstated as soon as possible.

“They know that recovering water from infrastructure projects is far more expensive and will take too long to deliver the results our rivers urgently need.”

In 2015, the Federal Government introduced a 1500 billion litre Cap on water buybacks from willing sellers and gave priority to infrastructure projects. So far, only 1,230 billion litres have been purchased from willing sellers.

¹ Lifeblood Alliance consists of environmental, Indigenous and community groups committed to keeping the rivers, wetlands and aquifers of the Murray-Darling Basin healthy for the benefit of current and future generations.

Member groups and associated individuals of the Lifeblood Alliance span the breadth of the Basin and beyond and include landowners, farmers, irrigators, commercial and recreational fishers, nature tourists, Local Government representatives, Traditional Owners, ecologists, townspeople and conservationists.

² High Res link: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1erVI0rH3UuZkAcL7sDEmyH-OLDFMbAw8/view>

Environment Victoria CEO Jonathan La Nauze said: "Insufficient water has been recovered to halt the decline in river health, let alone to reverse it.

"Purchasing 47.5 billion litres from willing sellers would not breach the 1500 billion litre Cap on buybacks. The time is right and the time is now. Let's get on with it and give our rivers and river communities a real fighting chance."

Northern Basin valleys account for about two thirds of the water still needed to meet the Basin Plan water recovery targets.

NSW Nature Conservation Council Chief Executive Chris Gambian said: "Water purchases in the north will provide more reliable flows into and along the entire Barwon-Darling river.

"This will not only benefit the environment but also riparian landholders and river communities all the way to where the river joins the Murray at Wentworth and then downstream to the Murray Mouth.

"Buying back water licences in the northern basin will ensure water security along the Darling and into the Murray River.

"This in turn will alleviate pressure on the Murray to provide the balance of environmental, community and industry needs through to the South Australian border."

Pastoralist Kate McBride said: "While water has started flowing into the Menindee Lakes the drought is by no means over. Many parts of the Murray-Darling Basin missed out on recent rainfall, and drought conditions continue to stress basin communities and ecosystems.

"We need to buy back more water now to reduce those stresses, build resilience and ensure we never repeat the horrific 2019 failures to meet critical human water needs ever again."

Ms Smiles said: "Public opinion is shifting rapidly. The severe drought and fish kills, diabolical bushfires and now the coronavirus pandemic, has heightened public awareness of how important a healthy environment is to society and the economy. We are very vulnerable to environmental and health crises.

"Australians want effective solutions to solve problems, not spin and denial of scientific realities to protect certain vested interests. Buying back more water from willing sellers through open, transparent tenders is clearly the best and cheapest way to revive our rivers and restore natural flows to support a healthy environment and communities.

"This new campaign aims to convey this message."

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Lifblood Alliance Members

Australian Conservation Foundation, NSW Nature Conservation Council, Conservation Council of South Australia, Environment Victoria, Queensland Conservation Council, Murray Lower Darling

Rivers Indigenous Nations, Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations, River Lakes and Coorong Action Group, Environmental Farmers Network, Inland Rivers Network, National Parks Association of NSW, Goulburn Valley Environment Group, Healthy Rivers Dubbo and Central West Environment Council.