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Buybacks needed TO REVIVE THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN!

Key points

- Rivers, floodplains, wetlands and aquifers of the Murray Darling Basin are in rapid decline, in some places on the verge of ecological collapse.
- The national environmental water recovery target set through the Murray-Darling Basin Plan has not been met despite the plan becoming fully operational on 1 July 2019.
- The quickest, most efficient and economically responsible way to meet the overdue water recovery target is to purchase the outstanding 47.5 billion litres of water from willing sellers via an open and transparent tender process.
- Recovering this volume is still within the 1500 billion litres limit on buy-backs set by the Federal Government in 2015
- Purchasing this water will bring benefits to the entire Basin, from Queensland through to the Murray mouth in South Australia.

Valley-by-valley Water Recovery Shortfalls

Valley	Water recovery shortfall (GL) ¹
Condamine Balonne	12.6
Border Rivers Qld	0.7
Border Rivers NSW	5.1
Barwon-Darling	1.9
Namoi	9.5
Lachlan	1.3
NSW Murrumbidgee	0.7
NSW Murray	10.2
ACT Murrumbidgee	4.9
Vic Goulburn	1.3
Vic Murray	1.8

Indicative volumes ²

¹ GL equals 1 billion litres

²https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Surface%20water%20recoveries%20including%20the%20SDLAM%20%28NSW_VIC_SA%20Factors%29_0.pdf

<https://www.mdba.gov.au/progress-water-recovery>

Context for Call for Water Buy-backs

The purpose of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is to improve the health of Australia's largest river system for public benefit. The primary actions in the Plan are designed to reduce over-allocation of water. However, there has been a significant failure to meet the water recovery targets set by the Basin Plan, a shortfall of 47.5 billion litres out of a reduced target of 2075 billion litres.

The quickest, most efficient and economically responsible way to meet the overdue water recovery target is to purchase water from willing sellers via an open and transparent tender process. Water recovery through infrastructure measures and increased irrigation efficiency has not delivered the expected benefits of water returned and is not a cost-effective use of funds. Economic modelling has shown that buy-backs are a much more effective use of available funds to secure water returns.

Much of the shortfall is in the northern basin where additional water purchases can provide benefits throughout the Darling River and all the way downstream through New South Wales communities to Victoria and South Australia.

The Murray-Darling Basin suffered serious decline through over-extraction of water, and needs water to be recovered for environmental use to repair the damage. The agreed volume of 3200 billion litres in the Basin Plan is less than the 4000 billion litres which scientists estimate is the minimum required to prevent further decline.

Subsequent negotiations during implementation of the Basin Plan have reduced the volume of real water by 675 billion litres, on the promise of 'equivalent environmental outcomes' from projects which do not have to be delivered until 2024.

No progress has been made towards delivering 450 billion litres of additional water needed to provide water to floodplains and habitats in the Southern Basin, flows to the Lower Lakes, Coorong and Murray Mouth, and flushing flows to export salt from the Basin.

Urgent action is needed to return more water and buy-backs are the most effective mechanism.

Background to Water Recovery Targets

The Murray Darling Basin Plan is a \$13 billion initiative to restore the health of our most important river system by addressing the over-allocation and over-extraction of water.

River, wetland and floodplain health across vast areas of the MDB have declined dramatically due to prolonged drought, and the impacts of over-extraction of water. Returning minimum volumes of water to river systems as soon as possible will boost their resilience and revive community spirits. Improved water quality, more reliable town water supplies and improved habitats for wildlife bring benefits to everyone living, working and playing along the rivers.

Water users also benefit from more reliable access to water for irrigation.

The Plan was legislated in 2012 and sets Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) on the amount of water available for use in the Basin. It also sets out valley by valley targets for water recovery to protect the long-term health and sustainability of the entire river system.

At the time the MDB Plan was developed, the best available science indicated more than 7,000 billion litres of water should be recovered for the environment to ensure its long term health.³ The

³ Guide to the Basin Plan

legislated plan sets a total surface water recovery target of 3,200 billion litres, a bare minimum to protect the environment and the communities that depend on a healthy river.

The Commonwealth government assumed responsibility for water recovery to 'bridge the gap' to meet the SDLs. It set aside \$3.1 billion for water purchases from willing sellers (buybacks) and \$5.8 billion for water recovery through infrastructure measures and increased irrigation efficiency. However in 2015 the government introduced a 1,500 billion litre Cap on buybacks and gave priority to infrastructure projects, despite them being a significantly more expensive and less certain means of water recovery.

The water recovery target to 'bridge the gap' is now 47.5 billion litres. This volume is still available under the 1500 GL Cap on buybacks. The Basin Plan required that all water recovery to 'Bridge the Gap' to the SDLs be complete by 1 July 2019 when the Plan came into full effect. This has not occurred and urgent action is needed as drought conditions continue to stress Basin ecosystems.

Lifblood Alliance

Lifblood 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 include

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.

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