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Submission: Draft Evaluation Framework for the review of water sharing plans under Section 43A of the Water Management Act 2000

The Inland Rivers Network (IRN) is a coalition of environment groups and individuals that has been advocating for healthy rivers, wetlands and groundwater in the Murray-Darling Basin since 1991.

IRN has regularly participated as an environmental stakeholder group in the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) consultation and community engagement process during the review of water sharing plans (WSPs) covering inland NSW water sources.

IRN offers the following comments on the Draft Evaluation Framework (the document):

1. Clarity on Commission's role

The document provides a clear outline of roles and responsibilities regarding WSP reviews under the Water Management Act 2000 (WMA). We note that lack of sufficient resources can limit capacity and that the Commission takes a risk-based approach in consultation with DPE-Water to prioritise the order of timely review of WSP and recommendations.

Under the NSW Program Evaluation Guidelines, it would be useful for the role of DPE-Water to be clearer in regard to transparency and collaboration with the review process.

2. Overall approach to WSP reviews

It would be useful for the consideration of other relevant state-wide and regional government policies or agreements relevant to the plan area to include an assessment of the alignment, or lack thereof, of the WSP with these other processes.

The review process should also assess whether the environmental condition of a water source has improved or deteriorated since the gazettal of the WSP and whether externalities are key drivers. Consideration of how WSP provisions can better manage for external drivers is also important. We note that the management of drought and climate change are considered in the review process.

IRN supports that the review include both outcome evaluations and process evaluations. We have found that implementation of WSP provisions have at times been lacking or very poor in both aspects. The definition and management of Planned Environmental Water in WSPs has been a key concern since their initial gazettal under the WMA.

IRN supports that the review of the performance of each WSP is evaluated against the principles, objects and priorities of the WMA. It is of great concern that links between objectives, strategies and outcomes in WSPs are unclear. We fully support the NRC providing recommendations on how these can be strengthened.

3. Additional comments

2.4 Evaluation questions: Besides reviewing if rules are in place to achieve environmental outcomes, there needs to be a review of the adequacy of the rules to meet the principles, objects and priorities of the WMA.

2.5.2 Key stakeholders: the document should describe water users as extractive water users. This delineates extractors from all other users. Other stakeholder groups could include recreational fishers, tourism providers and floodplain graziers.

2.9 Compensation: It is IRN's understanding that changes to rules in a remake of the WSP do not trigger compensation. Also, rules allowing for amendment of the WSP prevent compensation being triggered. This needs to be clearer in the document. NRC recommendations should be very clear about rule changes and provision of amendment rules leading to a remake of the WSP.

4. Priority issues

IRN has ongoing concern about how the WSPs, their implementation and the overall water management regime, meet the principles, objects and priorities of the WMA regarding environmental health of water sources.

In evaluating process there needs to be analysis of:

- how available water determinations are made in regulated river systems,
- how tributary utilisation rates impact on environmental outcomes and how the volume of usage is recorded and reported, and
- how the focus on 'no third-party impacts' has impeded changes to WSP rules and implementation policy

For more information on this submission contact

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