Message from the Northern Basin Advisory Committee Chair

The latest Northern Basin Advisory Committee meeting was in Goondiwindi. Commonwealth, Queensland, New South Wales governments and representatives from the MDBA were present, including Authority members Diana Gibbs and Barry Hart. It was good to have the message reinforced from the Authority that they are looking for strong and clear advice from the Committee, especially relating to decisions on possible changes to Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs).

The Committee has reinforced the importance of listening to communities following meetings in Dirranbandi, Narrabri, Warren and Goondiwindi where the MDBA and Commonwealth and States agencies updated local communities on Basin Plan implementation progress. The representatives who attended provided valuable feedback. This included the need for valley specific information for the Northern Basin SDL review and how non-flow measures can contribute (such as natural resource management actions).

Community meetings like these are excellent opportunities for government to gain local knowledge and to supplement the local knowledge of Committee members. The Committee can reinforce issues and innovative ideas from the community in their advice to MDBA.

Key areas of advice to the MDBA from the Committee meeting include:

- The Committee supports a number of science projects as part of the northern Basin science review – these are wetland mapping, floodplain inundation mapping, floodplain vegetation water requirements and vegetation distribution and condition mapping. These projects inform the SDL review. The Committee is seeking further clarification in relation to another three science projects.
- Seeking attention to how non-flow measures can contribute and the need for valley specific information for the SDL review, in line with the recent community feedback.
- More detailed consultation on the science projects is required with lower Balonne locals. This was raised at the recent Dirranbandi meeting due to the fact that the area has a significant local water recovery target. The committee believe it is crucial to get local input, so we recommended that (over the next 18 months in particular) the MDBA meet regularly with a small group of locals to ensure the science projects are informed by local knowledge.
The importance of the effective coordination of a monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework for the Basin Plan across the Commonwealth and States.

The Committee requested a review of long-term diversions limit equivalence factors – sometimes called ‘cap factors’ (to achieve agreement between the state and Australian governments on a consistent and equitable approach to determining the value of water entitlements) and we see this as a high priority.

The Committee is concerned that time frames around the Northern Basin SDL review are tight and also how the review will interact with other activities, such as identifying and assessing works and measures.

The Committee supports the socio-economic priority of refining the modelling tools and process, especially to assess how reductions will impact the contributing valleys.

The Committee is working with MDBA to ensure that the information that communities need is easily accessible from MDBA, particularly on its web site. This means that we are keen to have more information about valley-specific issues as well as explaining the Northern Basin Work Program progress, in easy to understand language. This edition of the newsletter includes a story about the type of information available and where to find it.

We are also considering other ways to help give northern Basin people relevant and timely information, and future newsletters and the MDBA website will provide details as they occur.

Mal Peters
Northern Basin Advisory Committee Chair
Environmental watering outlook

For the first time, the MDBA released a Basin Environmental Watering Outlook. It identifies upcoming opportunities for environmental watering for consultation and collaboration as the Basin annual environmental priorities are developed (due in June 2014).

The Basin priorities identify specific watering needs for the coming water year to help co-ordinate environmental watering across the Basin. Environmental water managers like the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder consider these priorities throughout the year alongside the state priorities which take a more local perspective.

This Outlook includes a review of last year’s environmental watering including achievements in the Gwydir and Macquarie systems despite below average rainfall in the northern Basin. It also details rainfall across the Basin during the past 18 months; a snapshot of the availability of held water; and the rainfall forecast from April to June.

Opportunities for environmental watering in any given year are prioritised to respond to actual climate, environmental and flow conditions. The long-term objectives, set out in the Basin Plan Environmental Watering Plan, will be elaborated in the Basin-wide Environmental Watering Strategy to be published in November 2014. The Strategy will set out the long-term outcomes for environmental watering in the Basin and strategies and coordination required to achieve them.

A few facts for the northern Basin are (please read the Outlook to get the full story):

- Northern Basin storages are generally less than 50% full.
- April to June 2014 rainfall is predicted to be slightly drier than average.
- A greater than 70% chance of El Nino developing during winter 2014. The development of an El Nino would mean that maintaining refuges in the Barwon-Darling would be a priority.
- Under forecast conditions the priority watering needs for waterbirds are likely to focus on maintaining habitat and refuge sites such as the Narran Lakes, Macquarie Marshes, Gwydir wetlands and the Lachlan catchment.
- Under average to dry conditions, the focus would be on maintaining critical habitat and refuges to support native fish populations throughout the Basin.
- Should a flow not occur in the Gwydir wetlands during the remainder of 2013-14, native vegetation communities are likely to require water in 2014-15 to maintain their health and resilience.
- A new cold-water pollution mitigation structure at Burrendong Dam presents an opportunity for environmental managers to consider management of all water released from the dam into the Macquarie River for environmental benefit. This priority is likely to provide direction for addressing cold-water pollution throughout the Basin.

For more information or to download the Outlook, visit the Basin Environmental Watering Outlook 2014 page on the MDBA web site. We also invite your feedback about the 2014-15 Outlook – to do this simply email engagement@mdba.gov.au.
Environmental water recovery in the northern Basin

The following diagrams illustrate how much water has already been recovered for the environment in the northern Basin and how much is left to be recovered, to meet SDL surface water reduction targets.

Local water recovery refers to water to be recovered from specific valleys (it is shown as a total here for the northern Basin). Shared water recovery is a separate volume of water to be recovered from across the entire northern Basin. As these diagrams show, we are well on the way to achieving the water recovery targets.

Barwon Darling Fact sheet

Want to know more about the characteristics of the Barwon-Darling region and how the Basin Plan is being implemented in this region? Simply visit the MDBA web site and you can read or download a Spotlight on Barwon–Darling. Click here to visit the web page.

Find out more...

If you’re looking for information specifically about the northern Basin, it’s only one click to find it from the home page of the MDBA website. From the Home page, scroll over the About the Basin tab in the main menu at the top of the page and you will see a Northern Basin option. Click on this and all will be revealed!

From this page you can find out a host of information about the northern Basin. You can link to the Northern Basin Advisory Committee and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations pages; find out more about the work program and the science being used to support it; learn about the Northern Basin Review; and get details about environmental sites including important wetlands and watering priorities. You can also access the first of our Spotlight features (more to come soon) for the Barwon–Darling.

You can also get more information on MDBA’s northern Basin program by emailing engagement@mdba.gov.au.