

Improving community awareness and engagement

Overview

- 4.1 Communication and engagement builds an increased understanding about environmental water, how it is used and the outcomes being achieved.
- 4.2 The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) relies on the support of third parties for environmental water delivery:
- State governments;
 - local groups and non-government organisations, including the irrigation industry;
 - environment groups; and
 - Indigenous communities.¹
- 4.3 The CEWH told the Committee the ‘basics are in place’ and that there is an intention to ‘upsize’ its engagement with the community.²
- 4.4 The Committee received evidence welcoming the CEWH’s work in this regard, but also identifying areas where its communication and community engagement could be strengthened.

1 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 4.

2 Ms Jody Swirepik, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 28 March 2018, p. 3.

Communicating information on environmental water

4.5 A number of submissions and witnesses regarded the CEWH's approach to communication as generally being successful.³ Examples included the 'good neighbour' policy, interactions with community reference groups, and acknowledging the importance of local expertise in environmental water management.⁴

4.6 Others suggested that improvements could be made.⁵ For example, Mr Mark McKenzie (CEO, NSW Irrigators' Council) stated:

We believe that in the water space CEWH has been probably the best communicator of what they're doing with their water and how they do it, but I agree... it can always be done better.⁶

4.7 Mr McKenzie said communicating with local communities and demonstrating outcomes is an important element of managing expectations. He added that this is necessary to justify the Commonwealth's investment in environmental water.⁷

4.8 Ms Gabrielle Coupland (Chair, Southern Riverina Irrigators) said:

Our communities have suffered very real pain in terms of water recovery... We want to know that our very real pain is delivering very tangible outcomes throughout the basin. We want to make sure that our water is going to where it was acquired for, and I think the best way to do that is to be very clear about: this is how much water we've recovered, this is what this water is going to be used for and these are the outcomes that we've achieved.⁸

3 Nature Foundation South Australia, *Submission 22*, p. 4; Nature Conservation Council, *Submission 24*, p. 5; New South Wales Irrigators Council, *Submission 32*, p. 6; Mr Les Gordon, Chair, Water Taskforce, National Farmers' Federation, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 23 May 2018, p. 1.

4 National Irrigators' Council, *Submission 23*, p. 16; Professor Robyn Watts, *Committee Hansard*, Albury, 30 April 2018, p. 11.

5 Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, *Submission 19*, p. 7; Nature Conservation Council, *Submission 24*, p. 6; National Farmers' Federation, *Submission 29*, p. 6; Dr Grant Tranter, Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 22 June 2018, p. 16.

6 Mr Mark McKenzie, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Irrigators' Council, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 22 June 2018, pp. 20-21.

7 Mr Mark McKenzie, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Irrigators' Council, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 22 June 2018, p. 21.

8 Mrs Gabrielle Coupland, Chair, Southern Riverina Irrigators, *Committee Hansard*, Albury, 30 April 2018, p. 29.

- 4.9 As discussed in Chapter 2, the CEWH's good neighbour policy aims to 'promote mutually beneficial relationships with other water users and landholders'⁹ and includes:
- not releasing water that would flood private land, without the consent of the landholder; and
 - flexibility in the use of channel capacity to minimise impact on other water orders from third parties.¹⁰
- 4.10 A number of irrigation and industry groups commended the CEWH's good neighbour policy, and called for its continuation.¹¹ For example, the New South Wales Irrigators' Council suggested that this policy has 'underpinned a constructive relationship' between irrigators, Basin communities and the CEWH.¹²
- 4.11 The Committee heard that education and awareness about environmental water is important for managing community expectations. Murray Irrigation, for example, submitted that the community needs to remember that environmental water use is an 'evolving science' and to understand the limits of what environmental watering can achieve, especially in a dry year.¹³ Similarly, Mr Jeremy Morton (President, Ricegrowers' Association of Australia), commented that the river system can experience wet and dry cycles and be healthy – which could be emphasised in public education programs.¹⁴
- 4.12 The Murray Darling Association submitted that more resources targeted at community stakeholders could assist to educate communities about environmental water and the role of the CEWH, through water literacy programs.¹⁵ The Greater Shepparton City Council recommended that a community education program would assist to increase environmental water literacy in local communities.¹⁶ Nature Foundation SA suggested

9 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 16.

10 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 17; see also Commonwealth Environmental Water Office, *Commonwealth Environmental Water Portfolio Management Planning – Approach to planning for the use, carryover and trade of Commonwealth environmental water 2017-18*, 2017, p. 2.

11 New South Wales Irrigators' Council, *Submission 32*, p. 2; Mr Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 22 June 2018, p. 15; Mr Steve Whan, CEO, National Irrigators' Council, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 23 May 2018, p. 7.

12 New South Wales Irrigators' Council, *Submission 32*, p. 6.

13 Murray Irrigation, *Submission 30*, p. 11.

14 Mr Jeremy Morton, President, Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 20 June 2018, p. 8.

15 Murray Darling Association, *Submission 27*, p. 2.

16 Greater Shepparton City Council, *Submission 35*, p. 2.

that existing activities, such as public workshops, should receive additional funding.¹⁷

4.13 Professor Robyn Watts said that while improving community awareness can be difficult, it is essential for the success of the Basin Plan. She also believed that awareness of environmental water should reach a wider audience.¹⁸

4.14 Ms Jody Swirepik (Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder) agreed. She said that when the CEWH engages with the community via fora such as water advisory groups, the community members participating are often already educated about environmental water.¹⁹ Broader community engagement, however, had been complex:

We still have problems with people knowing what we're trying to achieve – the real basics of: what is environmental water; how are we using it; is that what's flowing past my door? I think that we have a communication challenge to try and get to the broader community rather than the informed subset.²⁰

4.15 The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and Department of the Environment and Energy advised that all twelve environmental water management agencies are in the process of collaboratively developing an 'overarching communications framework' for water for the environment.²¹

4.16 The framework will be based on community needs, and aim to:

- improve consistency in the language and content of communications across agencies;
- enhance communication effectiveness; and
- enhance community understanding.²²

4.17 Mr Carl Binning, Executive Director Partnership Division, MDBA, said that 'a strategy for that process has almost been finalised' and that the strategy would see environmental watering actions 'communicated

17 Nature Foundation SA, *Submission 22*, p. 4.

18 Professor Robyn Watts, *Committee Hansard*, Albury, 30 April 2018, p. 11.

19 Ms Jody Swirepik, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 28 March 2018, p. 3.

20 Ms Jody Swirepik, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 28 March 2018, p. 3.

21 Murray-Darling Basin Authority, *Submission 34*, p. 17.

22 Murray-Darling Basin Authority, *Submission 34*, p. 17; Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38.1*, p. 12.

effectively' across the Basin and supported by all the environmental water agencies.²³

Language and terminology

- 4.18 The National Irrigators' Council submitted that there is confusion within communities around the roles, responsibilities and activities of each of the main water management agencies – the CEWH, MDBA and State agencies.²⁴ The National Irrigators' Council suggested that 'aligning language and frameworks' could be an initial step in reducing this confusion.²⁵
- 4.19 The Murray-Darling Basin Authority agreed that the different terminologies used by different agencies can add complexity and cause confusion for community members.²⁶ Mr Denis Flett, Chairperson of the Victorian Environmental Water Holder, said:
- Recent research illustrated to us that there needs to be a simplification in the way water management concepts are communicated, emphasising the importance of speaking to people in a language they understand.²⁷
- 4.20 The Victorian Government also submitted that 'water sector language' contributes to communities' confusion around, and misunderstanding of, environmental water.²⁸
- 4.21 Some submissions suggested that the term 'environmental water' could be replaced with 'community water'.²⁹

Determining environmental water priorities

- 4.22 While the MDBA sets the formal annual water priorities for the Murray Darling Basin, the Basin states and CEWH also develop watering priorities of their own.³⁰

23 Mr Carl Binning, Executive Director, Partnerships Division, Murray-Darling Basin Authority, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 27 June 2018, p. 8.

24 National Irrigators' Council, *Submission 23*, p. 13.

25 National Irrigators' Council, *Submission 23*, p. 13.

26 Murray-Darling Basin Authority, *Submission 34*, p. 17.

27 Mr Denis Flett, Chairperson, Victorian Environmental Water Holder, *Committee Hansard*, Albury, 30 April 2018, p. 2.

28 The Victorian Government, *Submission 41*, p. 20.

29 Dr Tony Alessi, *Submission 7*, p. 1; Australian Floodplain Association, *Submission 20*, pp. 2-3; Mr Steve Whan, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 23 May 2018, p. 7.

30 Murray-Darling Basin Authority, *Submission 34*, p. 1.

- 4.23 The Queensland Farmers' Federation submitted that there is an 'unclear definition of roles' for setting environmental watering priorities between agencies, which may cause unnecessary duplication of effort.³¹ Cotton Australia and the National Irrigators' Council shared this concern and submitted that the determination of priorities for Commonwealth owned water should sit solely with the CEWH.³²
- 4.24 The Committee also received evidence on the importance of involving local groups in the development of watering priorities.³³ For example, Mr Steve Whan said that a vital part of local knowledge is building upwards to a large-scale view, to engage with local communities. He commented that at the state level Victoria and NSW already link watering plans with local priorities by engaging with local communities through catchment management authorities (VIC) and watering committees (NSW).³⁴
- 4.25 Mr Grant Rigney (Acting Chair, Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations) said that Indigenous communities are consulted late in the development process and given minimal time to respond to watering priorities.³⁵
- 4.26 The Department of Environment and Energy submitted that the annual watering priorities it sets are developed in collaboration with multiple stakeholders, including local communities and delivery partners. The Department noted that future watering priorities will also be guided by the Basin states' long-term environmental watering plans.³⁶

Local engagement officers

- 4.27 The CEWH employs six permanent 'local engagement officers' across the Basin. The local engagement officers live and work in towns across the Basin, and their key role is to 'assist members of the community to participate in environmental water planning and decision making'.³⁷ This includes:
- providing outreach to local communities;

31 Queensland Farmers' Federation, *Submission 13*, p. 4.

32 Cotton Australia, *Submission 5*, p. 3; National Irrigators' Council, *Submission 23*, p. 13.

33 Mr Grant Rigney, Acting Chair, Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, *Committee Hansard*, Murray Bridge, 2 May 2018, p. 2; Mr Steve Whan, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 23 May 2018, p. 7.

34 Mr Steve Whan, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 23 May 2018, p. 7.

35 Mr Grant Rigney, Acting Chair, Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, *Committee Hansard*, Murray Bridge, 2 May 2018, p. 2.

36 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, pp. 11-12.

37 Commonwealth Environmental Water Office, *Commonwealth Environmental Water Portfolio Management Planning – Approach to planning for the use, carryover and trade of Commonwealth environmental water 2017-18*, 2017, p. 4.

- accessing local knowledge to feedback to the CEWH;
 - participating in community events, industry forums and state agency committee meetings; and
 - allowing locals to raise concerns about environmental water management and delivery.³⁸
- 4.28 The 2017 *Review of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder's operations and business processes* highlighted the importance of local engagement officers, commenting that they 'help keep everyone in the loop, avoid surprises, and ensure information disseminates ... as fast and as far as possible'.³⁹
- 4.29 The Committee received evidence in support of the continued employment of the local engagement officers. For example, the Nature Foundation SA noted positive connections with local engagement officers,⁴⁰ and the NSW Irrigators' Council commended the employment of the officers to build community engagement.⁴¹ Dr Anne Jensen suggested that expanding the local engagement officer initiative would help to further increase community knowledge and engagement.⁴²

Reporting information and outcomes

- 4.30 There are multiple government agencies involved in managing environmental water within the Murray-Darling Basin. Each has its own specified reporting requirements.

38 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 55; Department of the Environment and Energy, *Annual Report 2015-16*, p. 77.

39 Dr R Neil Byron, *Review of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder's operations and business processes*, November 2017, p. 27, at <http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/11eb1ffc-653c-482e-bc06-d6fc2dec5379/files/cewh-review-final-report.pdf>.

40 Mr Hugo Hopton, CEO, Nature Foundation SA, *Submission 22*, p. 4; see also: Dr Anne Jensen, Environmental Consultant, *Submission 25*, p. 2.

41 New South Wales Irrigators' Council, *Submission 32*, p. 2.

42 Dr Anne Jensen, *Submission 25*, p. 2.

Table 4.1 Environmental water reporting

Agency	Reporting requirements	Scale
Murray-Darling Basin Authority	Environmental objectives of the Basin Plan	Basin wide
Basin States	Environmental objectives of the Basin Plan	Local or site level
Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder	Contribution of Commonwealth environmental water to environmental objectives Environmental outcomes achieved	Basin wide

Source Murray-Darling Basin Authority, *Submission 34*, pp. 13-14.

4.31 The Committee received evidence on the need to ensure clear, regular and transparent reporting on environmental water.⁴³ Current arrangements may lead to confusion, for reasons that include:

- a lack of clarity around the roles and responsibilities of the different organisations;⁴⁴
- having multiple and overlapping reports on environmental watering outcomes;⁴⁵ and
- different language use among organisations and jurisdictions.⁴⁶

4.32 For example, Ms Sarah Moles submitted that it is not clear 'who is who in the water zoo' and that the community is 'often ill-informed' about which agency is responsible for different areas of water management.⁴⁷ Ms Moles suggested that more information could be made available online.⁴⁸

4.33 Councillors Jason Modica and Anthony Cirillo from the Mildura Rural City Council believed that public reporting needs to be increased. They suggested that reporting should specify clearly where and how much water has been used and the expected environmental outcomes for that

43 The Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering, *Submission 11*, p. 2; Southern Riverina Irrigators, *Submission 21*, p. 3; National Irrigators' Council, *Submission 23*, p. 14; Murray Darling Association, *Submission 27*, p. 3.

44 Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, *Submission 19*, p. 6.

45 Gwydir Valley Irrigators' Association, *Submission 39*, p. 4.

46 National Irrigators' Council, *Submission 23*, p. 13.

47 Ms Sarah Moles, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

48 Ms Sarah Moles, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

water.⁴⁹ Dr Grant Tranter (Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre) said that local communities see environmental water released down the river and need to know what is going to be achieved from the water to be confident in its use.⁵⁰ Dr Tranter said:

If there's one thing the CEWH could probably do better, it's their communications strategy. There are these success stories out there, but it's up to the super sleuths at home to google the success stories. They should be front and centre.⁵¹

- 4.34 Dr Robyn Watts also commented that while the CEWH produces media releases and notices about environmental water, this is not always done regularly. She said this can lead to misunderstandings about events within the river system. Dr Watts said:

In the absence of regular information from the CEWH, I think the community has often attributed some of the detrimental outcomes they see in river systems to environmental water at times when in fact no environmental water is being delivered.⁵²

- 4.35 The Gwydir Valley Irrigators' Association emphasised the importance of clarity in reporting on the outcome of environmental watering events:

We would like to see a lot more transparency on the government's behalf as far as what the target for the environmental water is and then, afterwards, to see the results...A lot of the time it's very difficult to find out the results – what an event of the environmental water has achieved.⁵³

- 4.36 The Association further submitted that information sharing by the CEWH and related organisations should be more timely. The submission noted that while the CEWH's monitoring reports are made available following the completion of a water year in June, the timeframe does not support forward planning:

For example, the monitoring report for the 2015-16 water year was provided in late November 2016, which appears timely following

49 Councillor Jason Modica, Mildura Rural City Council, *Proof Committee Hansard*, Mildura, 1 May 2018, p. 3; Councillor Anthony Cirillo, Mildura Rural City Council, *Committee Hansard*, Mildura, 1 May 2018, p. 6.

50 Dr Grant Stephen Tranter, Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 22 June 2018, p. 18.

51 Dr Grant Stephen Tranter, Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 22 June 2018, p. 16.

52 Dr Robyn Watts, Environmental Sciences, Charles Sturt University, *Committee Hansard*, Albury, 30 April 2018, p. 11.

53 Mr Mark Winter, Vice-Chair, Gwydir Valley Irrigators' Association Inc., *Committee Hansard*, Albury, 30 May 2018, p. 9.

the completion of the water year in June. But basin-wide and local planning process are required to be completed prior to June, meaning this information is not formally used to inform water actions until the following year and verbal updates are instead used throughout the planning process.⁵⁴

- 4.37 The Association commented that without timely reports on the outcome of the previous water year's activities, water managers will be limited in their ability to practice adaptive management effectively.⁵⁵
- 4.38 Murray Irrigation submitted that all environmental outcomes should be reported, including watering events that do not achieve the intended outcomes. Murray Irrigation suggested that such reporting will help build community confidence in the accuracy of future reporting, by fostering trust that the CEWH will not conflate positive outcomes or hide negative ones.⁵⁶
- 4.39 The Environmental Defenders Office Australia submitted that the CEWH's reporting requirements should be expanded to include water 'disposed of' during the watering year. This would include information on the proceeds from the sale of the water and how the proceeds have been or will be used.⁵⁷

Fostering community engagement

- 4.40 The Department of Environment and Energy submitted that the CEWH prioritises 'active engagement and participation' with local communities.⁵⁸ Such engagements include informal partnerships developed through participation in state-led groups such as Environmental Water Advisory Groups (EWAGs).⁵⁹
- 4.41 The Department of Environment and Energy advised that it engages with local communities through formal and informal partnerships, including formal partnerships with environmental organisations, First Nations groups, irrigation trusts and private individuals as well as government agencies.⁶⁰

54 Gwydir Valley Irrigators' Association, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

55 Gwydir Valley Irrigators' Association, *Submission 39*, pp. 3-4.

56 Murray Irrigation, *Submission 30*, p. 11.

57 Environmental Defenders Offices of Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 9.

58 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 52.

59 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 52.

60 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 49.

- 4.42 Ms Swirepik stated that the CEWH intends to ‘upsized’ the engagement that occurs through those partnerships and make it common practice.⁶¹
- 4.43 The Ricegrowers’ Association of Australia suggested that ‘significant improvement’ could be made to engagement with rural communities. It submitted that community stakeholders want to work in partnership with government agencies to ensure that local knowledge is used in watering decisions.⁶²
- 4.44 In a 2017 report on national water reform, the Productivity Commission recommended that where practicable, management of Commonwealth environmental water be entrusted to local or State or Territory partners.⁶³ A number of witnesses and submissions similarly expressed support for localism in community engagement.⁶⁴ Mr Steve Whan described the concept of localism:
- That means talking to communities on the ground and catchments about the priorities that they want to see for their areas and involving them in the management process.⁶⁵
- 4.45 Mr Whan expressed support for the recommendations made in the Productivity Commission’s report.⁶⁶
- 4.46 EWAGs are predominantly NSW based and consist of local community members, water managers, landholders, scientists, First Nations groups, local land services and government representatives.⁶⁷ These groups:
- provide advice on the use of environmental water to state government;
 - assist in the development of annual and long term environmental water planning, monitoring and evaluation; and
 - provide a forum for local community members to express their views and access water experts and government representatives.⁶⁸

61 Ms Jody Swirepik, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 28 March 2018, p. 3.

62 Ricegrowers’ Association of Australia, *Submission 19*, p. 7.

63 Productivity Commission, *National Water Reform*, Report no. 87, 2017, p. 32.

64 National Irrigators’ Council, *Submission 23*, p. 16; Murray Darling Association, *Submission 27*, p. 4; Mr Gavin Geoffrey McMahon, Chairman, National Irrigators’ Council, and CEO, Central Irrigation Trust, *Committee Hansard*, Mildura, 1 May 2018, p. 18; Mr Hugo Hopton, Nature Foundation SA, *Committee Hansard*, Murray Bridge, 2 May 2018, p. 9.

65 Mr Steve Whan, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 23 May 2018, p. 7.

66 Mr Steve Whan, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 23 May 2018, p. 7.

67 NSW Department of Industry, *Submission 17*, p. 9; Nature Conservation Council, *Submission 24*, p. 5.

68 NSW Department of Industry, *Submission 17*, p. 9; Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 52.

- 4.47 The Committee received evidence that EWAGs and similar groups are effective ways of engaging with communities, and fulfilling the objectives of localism.⁶⁹
- 4.48 The NSW Irrigators' Council submitted that since EWAGs already advise state government at a regional level, the CEWH should consider formally establishing EWAGs or similar groups to 'specifically advise' the CEWH.⁷⁰
- 4.49 The Nature Conservation Council observed that the CEWH previously had a formal partnership with community stakeholders. The CEWH's 2013-14 Business Plan included a 'Commonwealth Environmental Water Stakeholder Reference Panel'.⁷¹ This panel was chaired by the CEWH and its membership was comprised of community representatives. The Panel:
- shared information and views on Commonwealth environmental water;
 - identified community and state-level issues;
 - provided opportunity to keep local communities informed about CEWH activities; and
 - allowed for the assessment of the efficacy of stakeholder engagement.⁷²
- 4.50 The Nature Conservation Council noted that the Reference Panel was dissolved in 2014, commenting that this was a significant loss for local community engagement.⁷³
- 4.51 As discussed in Chapter 2, some other witnesses recommended formalising arrangements for an advisory or consultative group to the CEWH. The Department of the Environment and Energy submitted:
- Local people are well placed to see the changes in their local environment and often have an understanding or knowledge that can date back generations. This wealth of knowledge and

69 Cotton Australia, *Submission 5*, p. 3; Inland Rivers Network, *Submission 9*, p. 4; National Irrigators' Council, *Submission 23*, p. 16; Mr Steve Whan, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 23 May 2018, p. 7.

70 NSW Irrigators' Council, *Submission 32*, p. 6; see also Councillor Jason Modica, Mildura Rural City Council, *Committee Hansard*, Mildura, 1 May 2018, p. 3.

71 Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, *Commonwealth Environmental Water Office Business Plan 2013-14*, p. 17, at <http://www.environment.gov.au/water/cewo/publications/cewo-2013-2014-business-plan>.

72 The Nature Conservation Council, *Submission 24*, p. 6; Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, *Commonwealth Environmental Water Office Business Plan 2013-14*, p. 17, at <http://www.environment.gov.au/water/cewo/publications/cewo-2013-2014-business-plan>.

73 The Nature Conservation Council, *Submission 24*, p. 6.

experience is important in informing environmental water use decisions.⁷⁴

- 4.52 Ms Swirepik acknowledged the importance of accessing community opinions, including through EWAGs. She added that she would be open to considering a formal advisory group, and that the CEWH may be able to use existing forums, such as the Murray-Darling Basin Community Committee, as a structure for a formal group.⁷⁵

Citizen science

- 4.53 'The Committee heard that 'citizen scientists' could be another effective way to engage communities and assist with monitoring activities.
- 4.54 Murray Irrigation submitted that the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office could make use of 'citizen scientists' by establishing partnerships with local community groups, which could undertake monitoring and measuring of environmental water projects, in return for funding.⁷⁶
- 4.55 Southern Riverina Irrigators also submitted that the CEWH could develop a program in which local landholders could contribute to the monitoring of environmental outcomes. It suggested that community members would welcome the opportunity to partner with water managers in this way.⁷⁷
- 4.56 Both Murray Irrigation and Southern Riverina Irrigators commented that modern technology allows for volunteers to individually participate in essential monitoring programs, such as by using mobile phone applications.⁷⁸

Engagement with First Nations groups

- 4.57 The shared benefits of environmental water are important considerations in assessing the outcomes of watering activities. The *Water Act 2007* (Cth) requires the Basin Plan to have 'regard to... social, cultural, Indigenous and other public benefit issues'.⁷⁹

74 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 52.

75 Ms Jody Swirepik, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 27 June 2018, p. 7.

76 Murray Irrigation, *Submission 30*, p. 11.

77 Southern Riverina Irrigators, *Submission 21*, p. 7.

78 Southern Riverina Irrigators, *Submission 21*, p. 7; Murray Irrigation, *Submission 30*, p. 11.

79 Department of Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 51; see also *Water Act 2007* (Cth), s. 21(4)(c)(v).

- 4.58 The Department of the Environment and Energy submitted that the CEWH is collaborating with Indigenous communities on the use of environmental water.⁸⁰ The Department submitted that:
- Although these types of partnerships are in their infancy and will require ongoing commitment over many years, they are important to help build an understanding of our mutual aims, maximising the outcomes that can be achieved together.⁸¹
- 4.59 The Department's submission added that that the CEWH is 'endeavouring to grow our engagement with Indigenous people in the management of Commonwealth environmental water'.⁸² The CEWH has provided \$600,000 in funding towards the National Cultural Flows research project, alongside the Murray Darling Basin Authority and other agencies.⁸³ The project aims to 'secure a future where Indigenous water allocations are embedded within Australia's water management regimes'.⁸⁴
- 4.60 Mr Frederick Hooper, from the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN), commented that the National Cultural Flows research project has been one of the few occasions where the NBAN feel they have been consulted by government authorities, particularly the MDBA.⁸⁵
- 4.61 The CEWH has also provided funding for traditional owners to be trained in environmental monitoring. Notably, during this process the traditional owners being trained also imparted cultural knowledge to the trainers, and thereby to the CEWH.⁸⁶
- 4.62 The Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations submitted that engagement with First Nations could be improved by:
- establishing Indigenous identified positions in the CEWH and other agencies;
 - establishing pathways for First Nations to contribute to decisions about how environmental water is used; [and]
 - including Indigenous representation at high levels within management agencies, including the CEWH.⁸⁷
- 4.63 The submission also stated:
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80 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 51.

81 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 52.

82 Department of Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 51.

83 Department of Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, p. 51.

84 Murray Low Darling River Indigenous Nations, *Submission 26*, p. 2. For more information on the Cultural Flows Research Project, see <<http://culturalflows.com.au/>>.

85 Mr Frederick Arnold Hooper, Chairperson, Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations Ltd, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 20 June 2018, p. 2.

86 Department of Environment and Energy, *Submission 38*, pp. 51-52.

87 Murray Low Darling River Indigenous Nations, *Submission 26*, p. 9.

Aboriginal people should be engaged at the decision-making level, as well as through on-country assessments, to inform decision-making about the delivery of Commonwealth environmental water. Inclusion at the decision-making level supports integration of on-ground objectives into long-term planning.⁸⁸

- 4.64 Mr Grant Rigney (Acting Chair, Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations) said consultation and input from Indigenous groups could be delayed or belated. He said Indigenous nations would like to be involved 'at the beginning of the program' rather than 'three quarters of the way through then given about two or three weeks to give a response to environmental and water priorities'.⁸⁹ He said 'we've been pushed back and it's getting to the stage where we are pretty agitated about it'.⁹⁰
- 4.65 Mr Rigney said he would like to conclude agreements with the CEWH that provide 'a guarantee of what's going to be happening within that program or project itself'.⁹¹

Committee comment

- 4.66 The Committee encourages the CEWH to demonstrate clearly in its various public reports and updates:
- how much environmental water is being used, or will be used;
 - the expected environmental outcomes of that environmental water; and
 - the actual outcomes achieved or not achieved, including negative outcomes.
- 4.67 The Committee believes that localism is key to encouraging effective engagement with local communities, and is pleased that the CEWH values its formal and informal partnerships with local community groups.
- 4.68 The Committee notes that the Environmental Watering Advisory Groups (EWAGs) in NSW appear to be particularly effective methods of interacting with local communities. The Committee encourages the CEWH to promote similar forums in other Basin States.

88 Murray Low Darling River Indigenous Nations, *Submission 26*, p. 8.

89 Mr Grant Rigney, Acting Chair, Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, *Committee Hansard*, Murray-Bridge, 2 May 2018, p. 2.

90 Mr Grant Rigney, Acting Chair, Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, *Committee Hansard*, Murray-Bridge, 2 May 2018, p. 2.

91 Mr Grant Rigney, Acting Chair, Murray Low Darling River Indigenous Nations, *Committee Hansard*, Murray-Bridge, 2 May 2018, p. 3.

- 4.69 The Committee considers that the CEWH's efforts to strengthen community awareness and engagement on environmental water would benefit from the development of a clear and integrated strategy setting out both current activities and proposed future initiatives and objectives.
- 4.70 The Committee acknowledges the deep connection that First Nations people have to the Murray River system, and the valuable contribution that they can make to the planning and management of environmental water in their local regions. While the Committee is pleased that the CEWH values its current formal and informal partnerships with First Nations groups, it encourages the CEWH to ensure that First Nations groups are engaged with as early as practicable in the planning and establishment of watering priorities.

Recommendations

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder develop an updated communication and engagement strategy.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder continue to work and consult with Indigenous communities to further understand and inform sympathetic water use policies.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder review the adequacy of its existing mechanisms for consultation with the community. This review should consider if there is any benefit in establishing a formal advisory or consultative group to inform water use decisions.

Mr Andrew Gee MP

Chair

5 December 2018

