

Chapter 4

Cross-portfolio Murray-Darling Basin Plan matters

3.1 This chapter highlights some of the key issues discussed during the hearing on cross-portfolio Murray-Darling Basin Plan matters on 2 March 2018.

3.2 The committee heard from the Water Division of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office.

Implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan

3.3 The Deputy Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, Mr Malcolm Thompson, delivered an opening statement which updated the committee on the implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. He noted that around 2100 gegalitres (GL) of the original 2750 GL water recovery target has been secured while \$4 billion of Commonwealth funds has been invested in irrigation infrastructure to deliver water efficiency savings. Mr Thompson also noted that the Commonwealth had committed an additional \$9.1 million over three years to increase the compliance capacity of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA).¹

Snowy Hydro

3.4 The committee asked questions of the department and MDBA regarding consultation on the sale of Snowy Hydro. MDBA told the committee that there is a requirement for Snowy Hydro to release a certain volume of water into the Murray and Murrumbidgee systems each year and that an assurance has been provided that these volumes will remain unchanged.²

Progress towards targets

3.5 MDBA provided the committee with an update on the progress towards the long-term targets specified in Schedule 5 of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. The Basin Plan review conducted in 2017 found early signs at a local level that there have been environmental improvements and they are on track to meet the targets.³

Northern Basin Review

3.6 The committee sought a summary of the Northern Basin Review, including the reasons for the review and the research approach taken. Seven research projects were conducted to understand the ecological relationships between water and native fish, native vegetation and water birds. MDBA partnered with institutions including CSIRO, University of New England and Charles Sturt University and brought

1 Mr Malcolm Thompson, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, *Proof Hansard*, 2 March 2018, pp. 3–4.

2 *Proof Hansard*, 2 March 2018, pp. 5–8.

3 *Proof Hansard*, 2 March 2018, p. 9.

together expert panels to conduct the research. The research was subsequently independently peer reviewed.⁴

Compliance and transparency measures

3.7 MDBA provided the committee with an update on measures to increase compliance and transparency. MDBA is now publicly reporting on its management of complaints received regarding compliance issues. In addition, MDBA has set up an office of compliance and tripled the resources devoted to compliance.

3.8 MDBA is now publishing regular progress reports on states' compliance with water resource plans. Furthermore, in 2017, the basin water ministers agreed to the development of a compact which sets out the commitments of each of the basin states in relation to compliance and improvement. MDBA informed the committee that it was developing the compact as well as an ongoing reporting process to complement it.⁵

Use of telemetry

3.9 The committee raised concerns about the lack of telemetry in monitoring water usage. Officials explained that while there is a recommendation in the compliance review to expand the usage of metering, there are difficulties involved in using telemetry. These include:

- poor telecommunications infrastructure;
- the significant cost of repairing instruments;
- greater overland flow in the north of the basin than the south; and
- difficulties in accurately measuring water going through a very large diameter pipe.⁶

Interagency taskforce

3.10 In response to a recommendation from the Ken Matthews' 'Independent review of water management and compliance in NSW', a taskforce was established comprising representatives from the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, MDBA, and various NSW agencies.⁷ The body was tasked with delivering an interim solution within 90 days by way of immediate options for the protection of environmental water in the NSW component of the northern basin. The more enduring solution would be made available before the 2019 deadline for the finalisation of water resource plans.

4 *Proof Hansard*, 2 March 2018, p. 14.

5 *Proof Hansard*, 2 March 2018, pp. 18–19.

6 *Proof Hansard*, 2 March 2018, pp. 22–23.

7 Ken Matthews, *Independent investigation into NSW water management and compliance—final report*. Advice on implementation, NSW Government, 24 November 2017, https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/131905/Matthews-final-report-NSW-water-management-and-compliance.pdf (accessed 13 March 2018).

3.11 The committee sought an update on this taskforce. Officials told the committee that the taskforce, established in early 2018, has met three times with the most recent meeting comprising a two-day workshop.⁸ A discussion paper on options is currently under development and will be published by the NSW government for stakeholder comment. The committee was informed that the immediate options could be in place by the end of May.

Senator Barry O'Sullivan
Chair

8 *Proof Hansard*, 2 March 2018, pp. 30–31.