



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture,
Water and the Environment

Murray–Darling Communities Investment Package



Murray–Darling Communities Investment Package

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Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

GPO Box 858 Canberra ACT 2601

Telephone 1800 900 090

Web awe.gov.au

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Foreword

This investment package is about putting communities and jobs at the heart of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan. At a time when Basin communities have endured years of drought, a summer of terrible bushfires and while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to eat away at household confidence we need to invest in the people and the places that generate our nation's wealth.



In the 8 years since the Basin Plan was legislated a number of eminent reviews have identified improvements to water reform. Some communities have lost faith because this historic reform has become a catch-all for rural and regional decline. Its impacts have been highly variable – causing distress for some communities while others have prospered. We need to remember the original purpose of the Plan – to ensure a certain and sustainable future for communities, industries and the environment. We need a vibrant and profitable irrigated agricultural sector. The time for reviews has passed and it's time now to take practical action and demonstrate leadership.

The Australian Government is investing over \$230 million in new actions to create jobs and economic activity. The actions we undertake must benefit communities as well as the rivers and wetlands that make up our shared natural heritage. All the actions have been designed to avoid any need for future additional water buybacks. Instead the Government will focus on recovering water for the environment by modernising off-farm water delivery infrastructure.

The Basin is an economic and ecological powerhouse and protecting it is a shared responsibility. The Australian Government is one of six governments that agreed in 2012 to restore the Basin's health at a time when the devastation of the millennium drought was at the forefront of the collective consciousness. I look forward to working with communities and my Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council colleagues, to deliver a Basin Plan for communities. I have tasked my department to work with Basin jurisdictions and communities to realise the actions set out in this Package.

This Package outlines the Australian Government's refreshed approach and reaffirms our commitment to the Basin Plan – because it is about making sure future generations have a sustainable and certain future. It's an investment that puts people at the centre of the reform and provides a pathway to achieve a sustainable Basin for all Australians.

The Hon. Keith Pitt MP
Minister for Resources, Water and Northern Australia

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'K. Pitt'.

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Shifting our focus

Progress to date

The Murray–Darling Basin Plan is a long-term \$13 billion investment in Australia’s most important food bowl, its people and its environment. It was legislated in 2012 to give communities and industries certainty by limiting the volume of water that could be taken from the Basin at a time when scientific evidence about the likelihood of more frequent and severe droughts was strengthening.

Since 2012 significant progress on implementing key elements of the Basin plan has been made and the job is nearly complete.

- \$9 billion has been invested to increase agricultural productivity, modernise infrastructure and return water to the environment.
- More than 97 per cent of the water required to meet the sustainable diversion limits set by the Basin Plan is now recovered putting the Basin on a more sustainable footing.
- Thirteen Water Resource Plans, that set limits on the amount of water that can be extracted from Basin catchments, have been accredited by the Commonwealth. This includes all plans for South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and the ACT. New South Wales has submitted all of its 20 WRPs to the Australian Government for assessment and accreditation.

However, some challenges remain. These include completing the Sustainable Diversion Limit adjustment projects that protect environmental outcomes without needing to recover 605 gigalitres (GL) of water and improving progress against the Basin Plan target of 450 GL of additional water that will improve flows to the end of the Basin.

Case for change

Recent reviews have shown that Basin governments are at risk of not fully meeting some Basin Plan targets by 2024. They have found that some Basin communities are simply not seeing the benefits from the Basin Plan after many years of change and reform. The Australian Government established these reviews to ensure that its approach to implementation of the Basin Plan continued to be based on sound evidence and advice.

The *Independent assessment of social and economic conditions in the Basin (2020)* (the Sefton report) found that the impacts of water reform have been variable and that some communities were more vulnerable than others to a range of pressures, including drought, commodity price fluctuations and water recovery. The panel, led by Ms Robbie Sefton, was appointed in June 2019 and consulted closely with Basin communities to form its recommendations. The Australian Government has accepted 20 of the panel’s 22 recommendations in full, in principle or in part and will use its insights to inform priority strategic work areas with Basin states. The recommendations focused on:

- rebuilding trust and accountability
- investing in regional communities to stimulate long-term economic growth
- reducing the effects of water recovery on communities

- improving access for First Nations Australians to water for economic and cultural needs.

The *First review of the Water for the Environment Special Account (2020)* considered whether the Special Account has sufficient funds to enable the recovery of 450 GL of additional environmental water and to ease or remove constraints to environmental water delivery by 30 June 2024. The statutory review, led by Ms Sally Farrier, found that the recovery of 450 GL of additional environmental water and constraints projects are not on track to be achieved by 30 June 2024 without significant intervention.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has recently released its *Murray–Darling Basin water markets inquiry: interim report (2020)*. The interim report highlights that the current water regulatory framework has not evolved rapidly enough to match the complexities of Murray–Darling Basin water markets. The interim ACCC report does not include final recommendations, and the Australian Government will not pre-empt additional community contributions to that enquiry by making early responses. However, some of the issues raised by the ACCC, such as transparency of information and improving confidence in water governance systems, are likely to be addressed in part by actions in this Package, with more specific responses to follow the delivery of the final ACCC report and recommendations.

A new approach

The Australian Government’s commitment is to work with communities and Basin governments to bring communities back to the heart of the Basin Plan. We will work with Basin states within existing legislation to ensure that our approach protects the interests of Basin communities. The Basin needs a vibrant irrigated agricultural sector, along with a healthy and sustainable river system that supports the industries and people that live along it.

The Australian Government’s investments in the Basin are designed to stimulate long-term and sustainable economic growth. They are about promoting innovative ways to deliver water recovery that support, instead of damage, Basin communities.

While some Basin communities are doing well, others that are more reliant on irrigated agriculture have proved more vulnerable to the negative effects of water recovery. The recent Sefton report highlighted the need to invest in regional communities to stimulate long-term economic growth and ensure future water recovery does not outstrip communities’ capacity to adjust.

The Australian Government’s new approach to implementing the Basin Plan is focused around three high level objectives that are supported by practical and realistic actions:

- **Invest in community resilience and river health**
 - Investment is needed in communities as well as in infrastructure and river health to maximize the benefits of the Basin Plan. That means involving communities in identifying and implementing local solutions to local problems.
- **Build trust, transparency and accountability in government**
 - Government at all levels need to provide transparent and accountable leadership. Communities have asked for and deserve strong leadership; they need access to

reliable and trustworthy information and they need confidence in the institutions that manage water in the Basin.

- **Improving implementation of the Basin Plan**

- Basin government’s need to redouble efforts to achieve Basin Plan water recovery by 30 June 2024 to give the community the certainty it has been calling for. They need to do this in a way that maximises water recovery for the environment while minimising impacts on farmers and communities.

The Australian Government is committed to work with Basin governments on the objectives and actions in this Package.

Investment Package

Invest in community resilience and river health

What we are doing	How we will do it	By when
Maximising the benefits of the Basin Plan for communities	<p>Deliver \$34 million for economic assistance to communities struggling with the effects of water recovery by extending the successful competitive grants Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program.</p> <p>Grants may be used to provide eligible communities impacted by water recovery programs with practical assistance to boost tourism and recreation and to diversify economically.</p> <p>This action responds to needs identified in the Sefton report and builds on the \$40 million investment to date from 2 rounds of the Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program.</p> <p>This action responds to recommendations of the Sefton report.</p>	<p>Quarter 1 2021 – round 3</p> <p>Quarter 1 2022 – round 4</p>
Improving river health for all users	<p>Deliver \$20 million to fund community-driven grants for on-ground projects that will improve the health of rivers and wetlands.</p> <p>This builds on existing commitments to the environment of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$6 million for fish ways in the Lower Darling • \$10 million to establish hatcheries at St George and Menindee • \$15 million to fence Northern Basin riverbanks • \$9.2 million to modify and decommission water infrastructure at Toorale. 	Quarter 1 2021
Delivering environmental outcomes in the Riverland	<p>Deliver \$37.6 million in practical projects to sustain Riverland environments. We will work with the South Australian Government to deliver projects. This action recognises that there have been delays in progress towards securing an additional 450 GL of water to improve river health and habitats on the lower Murray.</p> <p>Recover the 450 GL of water for the environment in ways that support Basin communities.</p> <p>This action responds to the findings of the WESA report and the recommendations of the Sefton report.</p>	Quarter 4 2020
Supporting First Nations Australians to play an active role in river health	<p>Deliver \$3.1 million for four new First Nations River Rangers teams, creating around 20 jobs.</p> <p>Agree the framework for implementing the \$40 million Aboriginal water entitlements program with Aboriginal communities.</p> <p>Appointment of an Indigenous board member to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority.</p> <p>This action partly responds to recommendations of the Sefton report.</p>	<p>Quarter 3 2021</p> <p>Quarter 1 2021</p> <p>Quarter 4 2020</p>

Murray–Darling Communities Investment Package

What we are doing	How we will do it	By when
partnership with communities	This action responds to recommendations of the Sefton report.	
Investing in off-farm water efficiency projects to increase water recovery	<p>Shift the focus away from on-farm water efficiencies and buybacks.</p> <p>Work with the states and irrigation networks to identify projects to generate water savings through off-farm infrastructure.</p> <p>This action responds to the findings of the WESA report and the recommendations of the Sefton report.</p>	Quarter 4 2020
Strengthening working relationships between the Australian Government, states and local government to improve delivery of the Basin Plan	<p>Work with Basin states to accelerate planning and delivery of supply and constraints projects that are at risk of not being delivered by 2024. We will partner with the National Water Grid Authority on these projects.</p> <p>This action builds on the government's existing commitment of \$1.5 billion for these projects.</p> <p>Develop a new National Partnership agreement between the Australian and Basin state governments to provide funding for new and ongoing activities required to implement the Basin Plan.</p> <p>This action responds to the findings of the WESA report and the recommendations of the Sefton report.</p>	Quarter 4 2020



Murray-Darling Communities Investment Package

First report into implementation – March 2021



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture,
Water and the Environment

Progressing Community Investment Package implementation report

The Australian Government's \$270 million Murray–Darling Communities Investment Package was announced on 4 September 2020 to put communities at the heart of the Basin Plan. The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment undertook to report publicly on progress with implementing the package three times a year to ensure accountability to communities. This is the first report.

The Investment Package responds to needs identified by the community, stakeholders and governments and centers on three key themes:

- ▶ Investing in community resilience and river health
- ▶ Building trust, transparency and accountability in governments; and
- ▶ Improving implementation of the Basin Plan

The Australian Government's new approach to implementing the Basin Plan through the Investment Package includes practical and realistic measures:

- ▶ ending water buybacks
- ▶ shifting the focus of water efficiency programs to off-farm projects to protect communities and economies, and
- ▶ ensuring that the projects to avoid 605 GL of water buybacks are flexible, succeed and have community support.

The next report into implementation of the Murray–Darling Communities Investment Package is due in July 2021.



Investing in community resilience and river health

The 3rd round of the Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program opened for applications on 3 March 2021 following a 4 week consultation process seeking feedback on the program guidelines. The 3rd round makes \$34 million available to communities in grants valued at between \$50,000 and \$1 million. The program is focused on 38 communities that have been most impacted by past water recovery and recognises that they know how best to tackle the challenges they face, and what kinds of economic activity would best support them.

The \$20 million Healthy Rivers Program also opened for applications on 3 March and is designed to turn local knowledge into action for Basin farmers, landholders and community organisations. Practical, on-ground projects to improve the health of rivers and wetlands across the entire Basin are eligible under the 1st \$6 million round which offers small grants valued between \$5,000 and \$50,000.

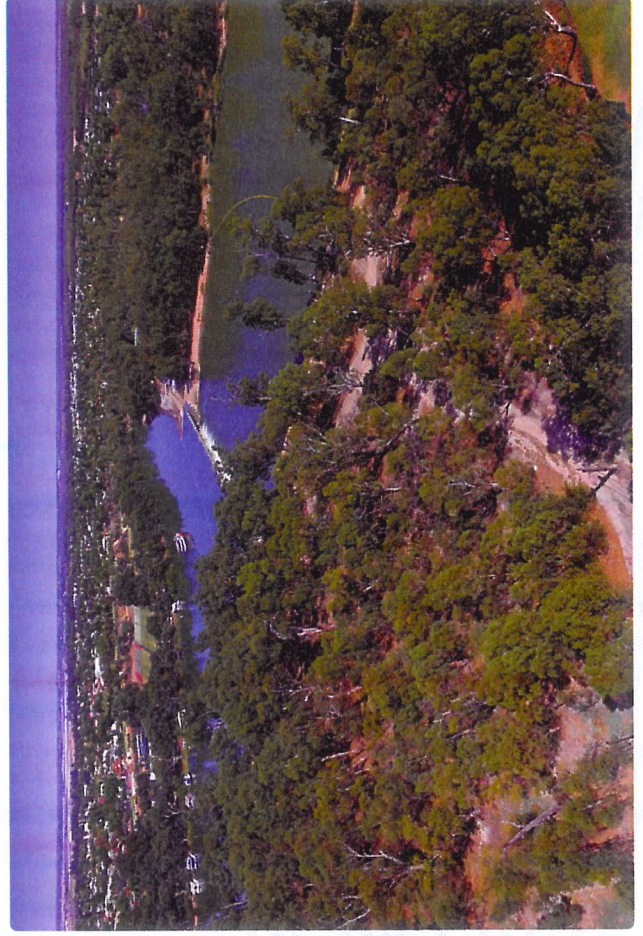
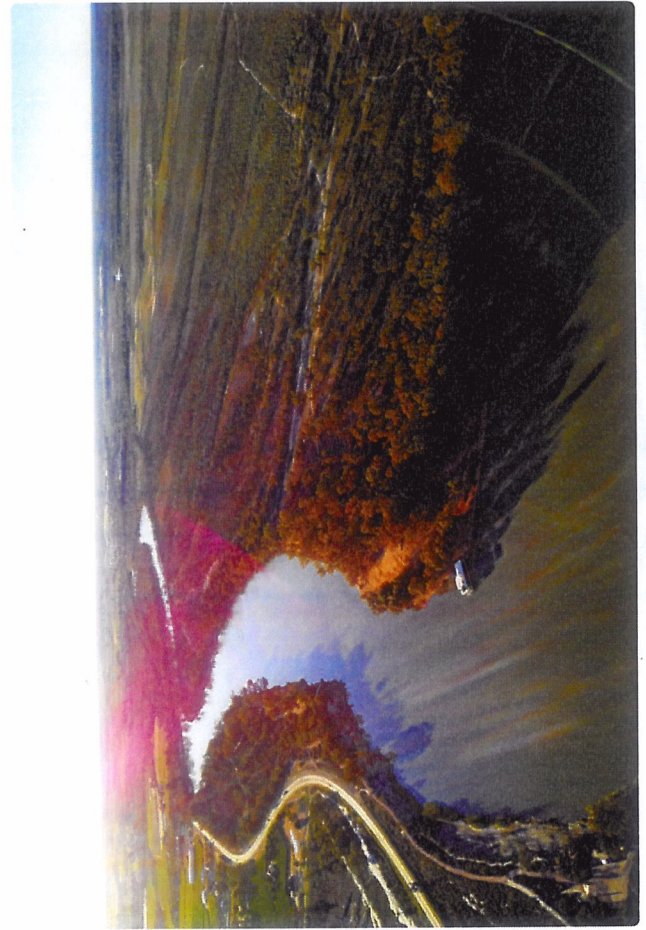
An outcome of the consultations was to redouble efforts to make sure all interested parties have the opportunity and support they need to apply for the grant programs.

Invest in community resilience and river health

What are we doing	How we will do it	By when	What have we done
Maximising the benefits of the Basin Plan for communities	<p>Deliver \$34 million for economic assistance to communities struggling with the effects of water recovery by extending the successful competitive grants Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program.</p> <p>Grants may be used to provide eligible communities impacted by water recovery programs with practical assistance to boost tourism and recreation and to diversify economically.</p>	<p>Q1 2021 – round 3</p> <p>Q1 2022 – round 4</p>	<p>Eligible communities can apply for round 3 of the EDP from 3 March to 12 April 2021.</p> <p>The government is making all the funding available through round 3 to maximise the benefits earlier for communities and contribute to regional stimulus.</p> <p>Consultation on the guidelines was undertaken from 18 December 2020 to 22 January 2021.</p>
Improving river health for all users	<p>Deliver \$20 million to fund community-driven grants for on-ground projects that will improve the health of rivers and wetlands.</p> <p>This builds on existing commitments to the environment of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$6 million for fish ways in the Lower Darling \$10 million to establish hatcheries at St George and Menindee \$15 million to fence Northern Basin riverbanks \$9.2 million to modify and decommission water infrastructure at Toorale. 	Q1 2021	<p>Round one of the Healthy Rivers grants program opened on 3 March and closes on 31 March 2021. This is a \$6 million small grant round. Two further grant rounds are expected to be available to the community in the middle of this year.</p> <p>\$1.1 million to NSW to progress planning for improved fish passage in the Lower Darling announced 23 February 2021.</p> <p>About \$200,000 to the Central Darling Shire Council and the South West Indigenous Corporation for feasibility studies to establish the native fish hatcheries at St George and Menindee respectively.</p> <p>Over \$7 million to NSW for the Fencing Northern Riverbank Program was announced on 22 January 2021 – work is continuing for pilot works in Queensland.</p> <p>NSW is progressing the preparatory work to modify the Boera and Homestead Dams at Toorale.</p>

Invest in community resilience and river health

What are we doing	How we will do it	By when	What have we done
<p>Delivering environmental outcomes in the Riverland</p>	<p>Deliver \$37.6 million in practical projects to sustain Riverland environments. We will work with the South Australian Government to deliver projects. This action recognises that there have been delays in progress towards securing an additional 450 GL of water to improve river health and habitats on the lower Murray.</p> <p>Recover the 450 GL of water for the environment in ways that support Basin communities.</p>	<p>Q4 2020 – establish</p> <p>Q2 2022</p>	<p>Projects have been agreed with the South Australian Government to achieve landscape-scale improvements and benefit important fish species:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restoring natural river patterns in the Lock 6 reach River infrastructure and operational investments in the Lock 3 reach Reinstating natural habitat conditions in the Bookmark Creek area. <p>Landowners and other stakeholders will be consulted as planning and implementation of these works proceed.</p> <p>The Off-farm Efficiency Program will progress Basin Plan river health targets without reducing the consumptive pool. The new approach is demonstrated through the Goulburn Murray Water \$177.5 million project that will generate 15.9 GL of water for the environment.</p>
<p>Supporting First Nations Australians to play an active role in river health</p>	<p>Deliver \$3.1 million for four new First Nations River Rangers teams, creating around 20 jobs.</p> <p>Agree the framework for implementing the \$40 million Aboriginal water entitlements program with Aboriginal communities</p> <p>Appointment of an Indigenous board member to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority.</p>	<p>Q3 2021 – establish</p> <p>Q1 2021 – establish</p> <p>Q4 2020 – appoint</p>	<p>The National Indigenous Australians Agency will open a grants round to progress this measure at the end of March 2021.</p> <p>An implementation framework is expected to be agreed with Basin Indigenous peak organisations in mid 2021.</p> <p>Mr Rene Woods was appointed as the first dedicated Indigenous member of the board of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority by Minister Keith Pitt on 18 December 2020.</p>



Build trust, transparency and accountability in government

The Australian Government is delivering the highest accountability regarding management of our scarce water resources by establishing a statutory and independent Inspector General of Water Compliance. This brings together the water compliance role of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority with the assurance role of the Interim Inspector-General of Water Compliance that replaced the Interim Inspector General of Murray–Darling Basin Water Resources. The Hon. Troy Grant was appointed to the role on 16 December 2020.

Establishing the role requires amendments to the Water Act 2007 and the Basin Plan 2012. These reforms are being developed in consultation with Basin states and the ACT. The Australian Government will introduce a Bill this year. Subject to the legislation passing a statutory Inspector-General will be appointed later in 2021.

The new role brings together the Commonwealth’s responsibility into a single statutory office to:

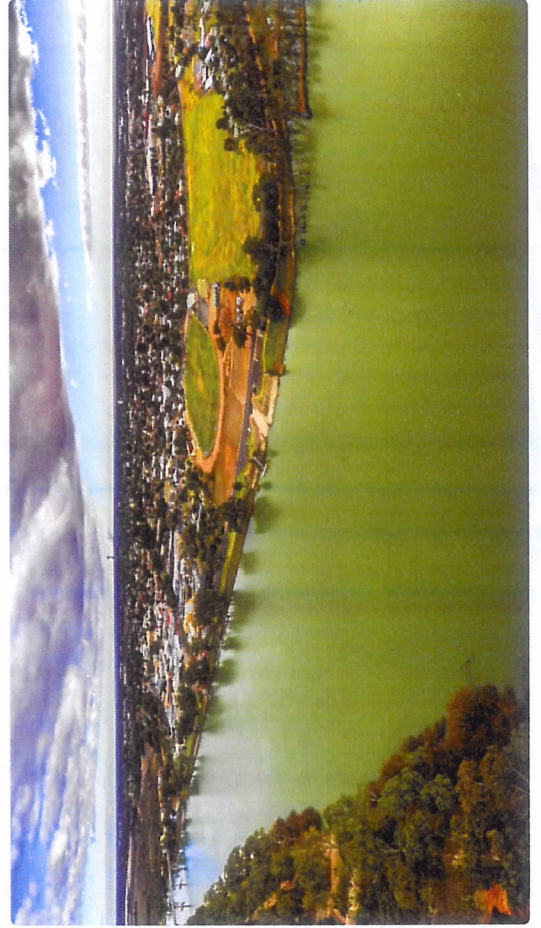
- ▶ improve trust and transparency in implementing the Commonwealth’s Basin water reform agenda
- ▶ deliver greater consistency and harmonisation of water regulation across the Basin; and
- ▶ strengthen Basin Plan compliance and enforcement.

Build trust, transparency and accountability in government

What are we doing	How we will do it	By when	What have we done
Providing stronger leadership	Build a culture of genuine engagement and trust with communities and between governments. Maximising the benefits of the Basin Plan for all communities. Lead the Murray–Darling Basin Ministerial Council in empowering communities to determine their own future and to keep governments accountable. Report 3 times a year on progress against the Package. Use the outcomes of the Sefton report to inform future work and decisions on implementing the Basin Plan. Appointed Air Chief Marshal Sir Angus Houston AK, AFC (Ret’d) to provide strong and strategic leadership as Chair of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority.	Q4 2020 – ongoing Ongoing	An inaugural Joint Basin Officials Committee, Murray–Darling Basin Authority board and the Basin Community Committee meeting was held 21 October 2020 to deepen relationships and identify ways to work better for communities. The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment has established a new stakeholder function to support refocusing our business on building relationships with communities to improve water reform. On 27 November 2020 ministers agreed that implementation of the Communities Investment Package was a priority. The first progress report has been delivered on time. The Australian Government response to the Sefton report was published on 2 October 2020. The report informed the development of the Investment Package and continues to be a key reference in the implementation of the Package. Sir Angus Houston continues to meet with a cross section of stakeholders virtually and in person. On 11 and 12 March the MDBA held a Basin Climate Resilience Summit that brought together leaders from a number of fields to share climate adaptation knowledge and innovations to help communities and the environment adjust to the impacts of climate change in the Murray–Darling Basin.

Build trust, transparency and accountability in government

What are we doing	How we will do it	By when	What have we done
Ensuring stronger compliance	<p>Establish a statutory and independent Inspector-General of Water Compliance. This will bring together the water compliance role of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority with the assurance role of the Interim Inspector-General of Murray-Darling Basin Water Resources.</p> <p>Deliver \$38.7 million to improve Commonwealth water compliance functions. This builds on the Commonwealth's existing commitment of \$60 million for improvements in water metering and remote sensing.</p>	Q3 2021 – ongoing	<p>Draft legislation to establish the statutory Inspector-General is being developed in consultation with Basin states and the Interim Inspector-General.</p> <p>An interim Inspector General of Water Compliance, Mr Troy Grant, was appointed on 16 December 2020 to strengthening accountability and compliance with the Water Act and the Basin Plan and building greater confidence in the integrity of water management.</p> <p>Work to transition MDBA compliance functions into the Office of the Inspector General of Water Compliance is underway.</p>
Providing better information	<p>Bring together water information from across governments in a more accessible format for water users and communities.</p> <p>The detailed platform will provide a one-stop shop for water storage, in-stream flows and trade information.</p> <p>This builds on the existing investment of \$4.9 million to the Bureau of Meteorology to improve real-time reporting on water flows.</p>	Q3 2021	<p>A first release of an interim interface is due in the middle of the year. User needs analysis is now complete, and informing the staging and design of the single source platform.</p> <p>User needs analysis is complete.</p>
Better monitoring and reporting of social, economic and environment conditions	<p>Deliver \$7.5 million to monitor social, economic and environmental conditions in the Basin.</p> <p>This action builds on a \$20 million investment in Basin-specific research so river management can be based on the best available science.</p>	Q3 2021 – establish	<p>Work to establish the priority areas for monitoring social, economic and environmental conditions in the Basin is underway. A team of expert consultants has been engaged to develop an integrated monitoring and evaluation program.</p> <p>A panel to oversee the \$20 million Murray-Darling Water and Environment Research Program has been established by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. Two consortia have been selected through an open tender process – one led by the CSIRO and the other led by La Trobe University.</p>



Improving implementation of the Basin Plan

The Australian Government has put an end to water buybacks and has shifted the focus of water recovery to off-farm projects, to avoid any impacts on farmer's water licenses.

The Australian Government has closed the Water Efficiency Program and replaced it with a new Off-farm Water Efficiency program to recover water off-farm for enhanced environmental outcomes as part of Murray-Darling Basin Plan implementation.

This delivers on the Australian Government's commitment to focus efforts on off-farm water efficiency rather than on-farm.

An example of the potential of the off-farm focus is the \$177.5 million investment to modernize and upgrade ageing off-farm water infrastructure in the Goulburn-Murray Irrigation District in Victoria to save 15.9 GL. This is a demonstration of the sort of projects that will provide significant economic stimulus for local and regional communities by creating hundreds of fulltime jobs during the construction phase while also delivering significant environmental outcomes.

Improving implementation of the Basin Plan

What are we doing	How we will do it	By when	What have we done
Designing and delivering water programs in partnership with communities	More effectively seek community input and demonstrate how that feedback has been used in the design, delivery and evaluation of programs.	From Q4 2020 - ongoing	The Department has sought community views concerning the intended outcomes and eligibility requirements of the new Healthy Rivers Grants and the Economic Development Program's third round. The feedback received was considered and publicly reported on to show how it was used to inform the design and delivery of the programs.
Investing in off-farm water efficiency projects to increase water recovery	Shift the focus away from on-farm water efficiencies and buybacks. Work with the states and irrigation networks to identify projects to generate water savings through off-farm infrastructure.	Q4 2020 - ongoing	The Water Efficiency Program was closed on 2 March 2021. The Australian Government will now focus the \$1.54 billion in the Water for the Environment Special Account on off-farm efficiency projects. A stocktake of potential off-farm projects to generate water savings was presented to the Ministerial Council on 27 November, 2020. This stocktake identified about 50 concept proposals including 10 that are shovel ready. The Goulburn Murray Water Water Efficiency Project will receive \$177.5 million from the Australian Government to modernise and upgrade ageing off-farm water infrastructure in the Goulburn-Murray Irrigation District generating 15.9 GL of water for the environment.
Strengthening working relationships between the Australian Government, states and local government to improve delivery of the Basin Plan	Work with Basin states to accelerate planning and delivery of supply and constraints projects that are at risk of not being delivered by 2024. We will partner with the National Water Grid Authority on these projects. This action builds on the government's existing commitment of \$1.5 billion for these projects. Develop a new National Partnership agreement between the Australian and Basin state governments to provide funding for new and ongoing activities required to implement the Basin Plan.	Q4 2020 - ongoing	Ministers confirmed on 27 November 2020 that community engagement and support for supply and constraints projects remains vitally important to all Basin governments. A ministerial council meeting is planned for April to consider pathways for dealing with at-risk projects. The National Water Grid is providing support on best practice project planning, management and governance. At the Ministerial Council meeting of 27 November 2020, Basin Ministers agreed the principles for collective action to improve Basin Plan outcomes.