

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications**  
**Legislation Committee**  
Answers to questions on notice  
**Environment portfolio**

**Question No:** 126  
**Hearing:** Additional Estimates  
**Outcome:** Outcome 4  
**Programme:** Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA)  
**Topic:** ACF report  
**Hansard Page:** N/A  
**Question Date:** 23 February 2015  
**Question Type:** Written

**Senator Xenophon asked:**

I refer to the Australian Conservation Foundation's report 'Restoring our lifeblood: Progress on returning water to the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin' ([http://www.acfonline.org.au/sites/default/files/resources/ACF\\_MDB%20Report2014\\_final.pdf](http://www.acfonline.org.au/sites/default/files/resources/ACF_MDB%20Report2014_final.pdf)) which has warned that on the second anniversary of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, while some aspects of the plan are proceeding as intended other key areas are not on track and some are in danger of going backwards.

1. How does the MDBA respond to this assessment – is this a fair assessment?
2. What are the key challenges threatening progress towards the plan's Environmental goals?
3. What are your plans to ensure that the authority maintains the Basin Plan's agreed timelines?

**Answer:**

1. The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) report is a wide-ranging document covering the Government's wider water reform package including the Basin Plan. The report also puts forward the ACF's own views on certain aspects of water reform policy they do not agree with.

For example, the ACF report voices concerns about government policy on matters such as capping buybacks, the cost of recovering water through infrastructure investment, the settings for groundwater Sustainable Diversion Limits, reduced funding for Landcare and institutional reform.

On other matters, such as addressing constraints to delivering environmental water, implementation of the Basin-wide environmental watering strategy and the development of water resource plans, the ACF report notes it is too early to assess progress.

There is nothing in the ACF assessment that shows implementing the Basin Plan is not on track.

2. The Basin Plan's environmental goals or objectives are to:
  - protect and restore the Basin's water-dependent ecosystems and ecosystem functions;
  - ensure these ecosystems are resilient to climate change and other risks and threats; and
  - ensure that environmental watering is coordinated across the Basin.

The *Water Act 2007* (Cth) (the Water Act) and the Basin Plan identify the taking and use of water, the effects of climate change, changes in land use and lack of knowledge as key risks that could threaten water quality and availability, such that the Basin Plan's environmental goals would be threatened.

The Basin Plan framework sets the parameters for addressing these risks through mechanisms such as the sustainable diversion limits and better water planning (including environmental water planning). The Basin Plan helps water resource managers identify risks and threats to meeting the Plan's goals so they may adapt their management approaches as required. The Basin Plan monitoring and evaluation program assesses how well managers are doing these things.

Successfully meeting these goals through implementing the Basin Plan requires the ongoing commitment and cooperation of all Basin governments. State governments continue to work positively and collaboratively to achieve these goals, in accordance with the Intergovernmental Agreement on Implementing Water Reform in the Murray-Darling Basin.

3. Implementing the Basin Plan is a joint undertaking involving the collaboration of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and all Basin governments. All Basin governments have signed both the Intergovernmental Agreement on Implementing Water Reform in the Murray-Darling Basin (the IGA) and the Basin Plan Implementation Agreement.

In accordance with the Implementation Agreement, the MDBA chairs a Basin Plan Implementation Committee to oversee the rolling out of the Basin Plan and ensure implementation is on track. The Committee meets quarterly and is supported by four working groups covering water resource planning, environmental watering, water trading, and monitoring and evaluation.

The monitoring and evaluation program requires Basin governments to report annually on their implementation of various elements of the Basin plan. The MDBA publishes an annual report on the effectiveness of the Basin Plan which draws on the reports from Basin governments, as well as other sources.

The Water Act requires that audits be undertaken at least every five years on the effectiveness of the implementation of the Basin Plan. The Basin Plan also contains a number of built in reviews that will check on progress, including five yearly reviews of the environmental watering plan, the water quality and salinity targets, and monitoring, evaluation and reporting capabilities.

Together, these arrangements will help ensure implementation of the Basin Plan is on track.